What can be done? Positive Possibilities for City Imagination and Action

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Abstract

This special issue explores the possibilities for city imagination and action, even in dark times. As scholars, we need to lift up positive possibilities and probe the theoretical and the practical implications for city action. Our current crises make this move both necessary and opportune. The crisis of COVID-19 opened a window for policy innovation among cities across the US. Federal leadership under the Biden administration loosened fiscal constraints on cities, something even Trump has not rolled back. The roots of the city innovations described here lie in the social movements and grassroots organization which predate the pandemic. Political coalitions with unions, schools, third sector housing developers and public banks complement neighborhood-based politics and pressure cities to act. The policy agenda in cities now contains dozens of items previously beyond the reach of acceptable and safe politics. That agenda is propelled by carefully organized social movements and policy development. This is substantive policy at work – rooted in coalitions of care that can't be totally reversed by the backward shift in federal policy under Trump.

Key words: policy innovation, urban social movements, progressive politics, local government

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For the last two decades, urban scholars have been focused on austerity and the limits to city action. In the strongest formation, cities are seen as urban austerity regimes (Peck, 2014; Donald et al. 2014), bolstered by state retrenchment and private sector capture of public services. These realities have understandably led to disaffection with the state by the broader public (Lafer, 2017; Streeck, 2024), part of the rise of authoritarian regimes in many parts of the world. Instead of an urban growth machine that linked urban governance with economic development (Logan and Molotch, 2007), the urban austerity machine pushes local governments to become either investment sites for financialization (celebrated by the Brookings Institute as urban entrepreneurialism (Detter and Folster, 2017), or worse, predatory actors who prey on their populations, especially low-income and minoritized residents who are over-taxed, over-policed and under-served (Atuahene, 2020).

The dark notions of austerity urbanism have captured the imagination of academic geographers in the US and Europe (Peck, 2014; Donald et al. 2014). Austerity is a depressing and debilitating framing, which chronicles urban incapacity and ill-founded innovation (Gray and Barford, 2018). Accordingly, other scholars argue that the research emphasis on austerity unintentionally kills the capacity to imagine alternatives (Blythe, 2013; Davidson and Ward, 2022). The emphasis on austerity's limits can be especially disempowering in the U.S., where cities' relative autonomy and resourcefulness under federalism have limited austerity's negative consequences compared to the U.K. and the E.U. (Kim and Warner 2021; Warner and Clifton 2014).

This special issue advances a more positive view - of possibilities for urban action. We are not naive in this project. We recognize the serious constraints under which cities operate - economic restructuring, rising inequality, aging infrastructure (Warner, Aldag and Kim, 2021) and rising state preemption (Briffault et al., 2023). But crisis really does yield strategic opportunities (Temenos, 2025). The COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. opened two connected opportunities that have endured longer than the COVID crisis itself. Vigorous community organizing and protests against police brutality during COVID's early days platformed a new and highly effective generation of social movement actors in cities. Their organized political power, in turn, pried open a window of opportunity for the federal government to fully reverse course from twelve-plus years of austerity. Capped by the American Rescue Plan Act, which shoveled a third of a trillion unrestricted dollars to states and cities, austerity was replaced by a "Politics of Repair," an attempt to address the broken fiscal federalism of the past few decades (Xu and Warner, 2024). Other scholars emphasize the moment's ephemerality and its inability to fundamentally change the structural features of US federalism (Kass, 2026). Our argument is that the ARPA experiments encouraged new imagination and provided significant levels of funding ($130 billion) for experiments at the local level that are worth lifting up, especially in this moment of rising authoritarianism and anti-urban policy in the US.

Urban scholars recognize that lived experience and urban policy are palimpsests. Even as the Trump administration seeks to erase the equity politics that flourished during COVID, a residual remains. And that residual is powerful. Not only is it found in all the physical infrastructure projects at the local level, it is also found in new political coalitions. Power to contest the assault on cities and city dwellers lies in the social movements and political coalitions who built out their power by confronting the crises of the last decade. On the one hand, structural pressure on cities' finances continues to grow. On the other, social movement actors have claimed state institutions, as Rodriguez (2027) lays out in her essay on the Chicago Teachers Union. Enlivened in part by a renewed U.S. labor movement, urban social movements have

demonstrated social unionism from below, a form of power that builds from cities to engage political power at higher scales (Rosen, 2027). While these multi-scalar efforts informed real policy change during the Biden years, they also stand as examples - real layers in the urban policy palimpsest - that provide the foundation, evidence and practices for future change.

This is not a time for despair; it is a time for strategic action. What can we learn from the anti-austerity politics and policy that flowered early in this decade? The Trump administration's threats are real and profoundly damaging to city life. Rather than rehearse them or gesture to polycrisis, our aim is to steer attention to the real and consequential counter-movements that are the basis of resistance and viable political alternatives. We live in cities, and are exercising our right to the city in all sorts of ways. Williams (2027) in his discussion of local reactions to the ICE raids in Minneapolis shows how "neighboring" makes the right to city real, even under quasi-military occupation.

This special issue is designed to offer a politics of hope at a time of rising authoritarian and anti-urban politics. The essays focus on theoretical implications for a substantive politics of policy change (Lake, 2027) and the conditions that give rise to a more progressive politics at the local level (Nicholls, 2027). The essays also bring forward innovations in public policy, which matter materially and in political organizing; and this changes what is possible both inside and beyond the city. The essays in this issue explore how this politics of resistance and repair forms and maintains itself. This politics of repair may carry us through this moment.

Financial Constraints and the ARPA Opening

There are critical precursors to the current moment. The challenges to cities' finances were building long before the Great Recession. City infrastructure is old and needs replacement. As city economies shift from manufacturing to services, especially education and health services, this has profoundly negative effects on the local tax base. Adding to that are the challenges of an aging population (Warner et al., 2025) and rising inequality (Caragliu and Del Bo, 2022). Countering these pressures requires capacities and tools regularly denied to cities. Rather than resources and revenue, cities get policy preemption, tax and expenditure limitations and routine antagonism from state and federal government (Riverstone-Newell, 2017; Hertel Fernandez, 2019). While this has escalated with federal preemption of local zoning and environmental review in siting mass detention centers, cities have identified ways to push back, as described by Kim (2027) in this collection.

Our current alternatives developed through two crises. The first, the Great Recession, began as a real estate crisis. When the speculative bubble burst, urban populations, and especially low-income communities of color, were the first to be hurt. Asset values plummeted and many residents faced foreclosure. The Obama Administration responded by bailing out banks, but telling cities that "main street could wait." And wait we did. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2011 was too little to make a big difference (Rubin and Willoughby, 2021). Federal urban policy promoted further financialization (Lake, 2014). A decade later, the COVID pandemic hit. COVID emerged first and most furiously in cities, capturing economically marginalized populations first in its death net - minorities and the elderly. Once again the federal government responded by bailing out the private sector first. The first Trump administration's signature programs, from the Paycheck Protection Program to the CARES Act, focused on the needs of the private sector (Warner et al., 2023). Cities were once again made to wait.

When the wait ended, something different finally emerged. In the first two months of the Biden Administration, Congress passed the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) of 2021. By

June of that same year the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) had passed. For the first time in more than a generation cities were flush with cash. Not only did they have funds to focus on equity, they were mandated to do so by the guidance from the Biden Administration. ARPA funds relaxed the real financial constraints cities had been facing for two decades. While some austerity theorists continued to advance the austerity urbanism logic, the reality on the ground was different. This was a chance to do something. We find that cities took this opportunity to support not only programs focused on infrastructure and public health, but innovative programs focused on addressing structural inequity (Diaz Torres and Warner, 2025; Doussard and Schrock 2025). ARPA changed the "learned helplessness" of austerity into a moment for action.

On the surface, the second Trump administration appears to have undone all that. Direct racist attacks on cities and on programs focused on inequality are core elements of the Trump agenda. Trump is not alone; he is supported by an apparatus of think tanks (Heritage Foundation) and oligarchs, especially from the tech industry. Extreme inequality, the rise of new technology (such as AI) and the concentration of wealth and political power in the technological elites has fueled authoritarianism and democratic backsliding (Riedl, et al. 2025). While the oligarchic tech takeover has severed the links between economic development and good governance, it also has exposed the limits of the growth coalition and the dangers of austerity regimes and rising authoritarianism. In the cracks, we see a Polanyian pushback (Polanyi 1944).

We highlight ARPA because its viability makes clear the U.S.'s brief receptiveness of a big, expensive policy with an explicit social justice mandate. There is a lesson in going big: ARPA stands almost alone for escaping the Trump administration's sabotage of public policy (Zhao and Warner, 2027). Even though it expired in December 2026, ARPA laid down a layer in the palimpsest of US urban policy that explicitly acknowledged inequality and the city's role in addressing it. It responded to and helped build and finance political coalitions creating alternative politics and policy. It offered a brief window of relief and elements of a foundation for the future.

Cities used ARPA funds to experiment with new approaches to address negative economic impacts of the pandemic, to strengthen public sector capacity and to rebuild infrastructure - water, sewer and broadband. While smaller cities put most of their ARPA funds into infrastructure (to absorb this one-time infusion of cash), even here the investments could be progressive. For example, St Petersburg FL used these funds to pay for hook ups for low income minority neighborhoods, while Buffalo, NY used them to fix lead pipes. The largest cities spent more funds addressing negative economic impacts and public health, while smaller cities invested more in infrastructure. Cities had flexibility to spend over two thirds of the money on "revenue replacement," but even these revenue replacement funds followed the federal policy nudge and were used to strengthen local public sector capacity, build infrastructure and address public health, negative economic impact (Xu et al., 2025)

This special issue explores two legacies of the post-COVID equity moment: experimental public policies with a clear equity stance, and new kinds of politics developed in the long chaos of Trump and COVID. Above all, we argue for this dual focus. Social and political movements develop through the goals they pursue, and social movement power both sets and circumscribes the agenda for policy change. Crisis has taught cities, their community organizations, and their local governments new ways of working. We must explore them. We can benefit, intellectually and practically, from a focus on what cities can actually do. Popper (1999) has encouraged scholars to expand their focus beyond problem definition to analysis of solutions. That is what the collection of essays in this special issue seek to do.

Roots of New Ideas and Practices

The policy alternatives appearing in cities have diverse roots. The political pressure from the Black Lives Matter movement during COVID and the broader economic and racial justice coalitions that had been building over the prior decade created the conditions for cities to enact sweeping changes to the regulation of low-wage work (Doussard and Schrock, 2022). Geographers take up this topic through the lens of policy mobilities and, increasingly through an underlying focus on the surprising geography of ideas, which are grounded and transformed through contact with place-based political movements. Crisis inevitably functions as a key catalyst, overwhelming institutional objections to new policies, thrusting marginalized advocates and coalitions to the center of action, and making previously inconceivable policies not just possible, but inevitable (Peck et al. 2025). A significant implication of this work is the mandate to trace ideas backward in time – a process that's especially helpful in the light of the COVID pandemic rapidly moving ideas from unknown to law. Many of the alternatives that appear in this collection have substantially longer roots, in austerity, the Great Recession and the generalized inequality of late capitalism. Taking these roots into account shifts our perception of radical ideas' staying power and support in politically consequential coalitions.

Taking this task seriously directs attention to the shared roots of alternative policy ideas. It is increasingly clear that inequality has become as much a driver of politics as an outcome. Increasingly difficult to ignore, the stark inequalities in cities pose questions existing policy (and existing politicians) cannot handle. Seemingly everywhere, the expanding distance between income and the cost of living raises the salience of social reproduction and collective consumption. Formerly monopolized by mania for growth and racialized crime fears, city politics now comes back, relentlessly, to housing costs, child care, transportation and the immediate and personal business of trying to make ends meet. Increasingly radical politicians are taking office – some, such as Barcelona's Ada Colau and New York's Zohran Mamdani, to great fanfare, but many others are resetting the agenda from their posts on city councils of less storied cities. Inequality has also "broken" many policies that never worked well: Consider New Yorkers rejecting Amazon's second headquarters because the high-paying jobs it might offer simply couldn't compete with the threat of further ratcheting up housing prices (Doussard 2025).

In some cities, left-of-center political movements pursue an expansive policy agenda built on maximalist – occasionally, radical – ideas long deemed politically unviable (Nicholls, 2027). But cities can capture financial circuits for collective wellbeing, even in more conservative places, as Friedline (2027) showcases in her essay on public banks. They also can promote shared equity housing as Ehlenz (2027) describes in her essay. In addition, cities are experimenting with new policies to promote basic income, curb the gig economy, and develop a previously unimaginable set of public services and goods (Doussard and Yenigun, 2024). These include universal child care, wealth taxes, publicly owned businesses, protective labor laws and other ideas too new and emergent to register. These measures have become viable enough politically that the fundamental question about them shifts from the defensive *how can this measure pass?* To the more assertive *what next*?

Across all cities, analysis of ARPA plans shows that cities tended toward equity (Warner et al. 2026). Many used universalizing logics, serving everyone and strengthening the economy, to justify radical new social programs such as buying back medical debt or extending water and broadband infrastructure to underserved neighborhoods. Often equity was embedded in design, but not put on the marquee (Diaz Torres and Warner, 2025). At first glance, the failure to always explicitly name equity could be a concern – that cities aren't really stepping out. But in hindsight

it seems strategic; embedded policies are more likely to survive the current Trump attacks. What's in a name? And what is the balance between naming and action? City leaders are pragmatic, building the political coalitions to explore innovative programs on the ground. It may not matter which leads first – ideas or action (Diaz Torres and Warner 2025; Lake 2017).

What Pushed it?

Vigorous experimentation and organizing in urban social movements has made these previously unimagined and unviable policies possible and material (Doussard 2015). Painstaking and deliberate, the underlying work includes the U.S. labor movement's decision three decades ago to build relationships with community organizations and develop local policy; the emergence of a new cadre of unabashedly ideological social movement leaders committed to centering race, ethnicity and social difference in their work; the establishment of national policy entrepreneurship networks to develop, refine and shop policy; and the everyday experience of inequality and government failure making publics, politicians and policymakers open to radically new ideas. As the fault lines of political power shift seemingly by the day, moving redistributive policy requires clear goals and creative organizing strategies (Doussard and Schrock 2022; 2023; 2025; Reynolds and Simmons 2021).

Embracing race, ethnicity and difference allows left-of-center urban social movements to work through multi-dimensional networks (Nicholls et al., 2014). Depending on the issue, these networks combine activists from previously separated causes; link neighborhood interests, and the interests of central cities to suburbs; and allow organized political actors to strategically move advocacy horizontally across jurisdictions and vertically across scales. The opportunistic expansion of the $15 minimum wage, which travelled from tiny Seatac Washington, to Seattle and Chicago, and then to cities, counties and states across the U.S. illustrates (but does not exhaust) the power of these networks. Centering race also has the advantage of providing an alternate means for organizers to "cut" discreet, action-ready issues from otherwise overwhelming and intangible problems. Racial justice and the related lived experience of racism prove especially effective in allowing social movements to simplify complicated fiscal issues in ways that motivate action (Doussard and Schrock, 2022). In Chicago, organizers found traction on the problem of the city's inequitable Tax Increment Financing Program by shifting focus from the mechanics of equalized assessed value to the reality of TIF diverting resources to wealthy, white neighborhoods (Doussard, 2021). Reparations got on the agenda of many cities as Black-led movements pushed for new approaches to address historic harm and cultural trauma (Williams and Stell 2023; Poe, 2022). Just as often, the city's most marginal residents bet on their own resources, enacting in their responses to COVID and its dislocation the kind of caring cities they hoped to build (Rodriguez, 2024; Kim and Chun, 2025).

Yet the rise of effective left-of-center political coalitions in cities is also about at least one fundamental factor outside of their direct control. Inequality, and especially inequality made tangible by soaring asset values and runaway increases to the cost of living, now set the agenda in cities seemingly everywhere. Inequality directly enhances the salience of social movements' core issues, particularly rising housing costs and deficient public services and support for social reproduction. Wages and working conditions – the conventional stuff of progressive political organizing in the past – have increasingly little prospect of catching up to these costs, but they too are now a staple of elections and ballot initiatives. Inequality on this scale is more than just a policy problem. It also functions as a stimulus to experimentation and innovation in everyday life, with low-earning city dwellers expanding their social networks and neighborhood ties in

order to cover the increasingly unaffordable rent (Rosen et al, 2023). Rather than dismiss or romanticize these struggles, it is crucial to learn from them.

As these forces suggest, the policy agenda in cities now contains dozens of items previously beyond the limits of safe politics. The COVID pandemic and waves of federal cash (including ARPA, IIJA, etc.) enable responses to crisis conditions in which increasingly speculative ideas pass from possibility into reality (Temenos 2026). New solidarities are created through collaboration and partnerships between city government, non-profits and community organizers. RIP- Medical debt, a mission-driven organization, has helped many cities buy back medical debt. Using financial instruments to buy back debt at pennies on the dollar, RIP Medical Debt helped cities from Chicago to Toledo provide relief from the burden of millions of dollars of medical debt for thousands of their residents (Holpuch, 2022). Another example is broadband, where coalitions of cities, school districts, long-standing telephone and electric cooperatives, and newly formed mission-driven Internet service providers collaborated to build out broadband access in underserved areas (Warner, Bravo and Shen, 2026). They were able to do this despite some states' preemptions on municipal broadband. Partnerships with mission driven ISPs, along with federal ARPA and IIJA funding made this possible.

Larger cities, in particular, used post-pandemic cash to experiment deliberately with new policies. For example, Chicago and Los Angeles both ran their ARPA budgets through special mayoral offices dedicated to policy experimentation. This is much more than a conventional story of big-city resources and innovation. Smaller municipal offices, ranging from St. Paul's Office of Financial Empowerment to Philadelphia's housing and social services agencies and the City of Toledo, took the leap into paying basic incomes and buying out residents' medical debt. Befitting the rise of inequality as a propulsive motivation in politics, frontline municipal employees – the fabled street-level bureaucrats of sociological research – did not just stand down and allow these policies to pass into law. They fully embraced them, working behind the scenes to overcome technical questions and find ways to bend policy to progressive ends (Doussard and Quinn, 2025). There is much to be said and learned about the propulsive role of these overlooked actors (Nicholls and Baran, 2024). Focusing on the policies they've pushed over the line is a start.

Looking to the Future

Urban scholars often focus on negative forces and the limits to city response (Peck and Whiteside, 2016). While that austere view informs a critical analysis of the problem, it yields few insights into how to move forward. Urban scholars also need the ability to talk about the positive. What does a forward agenda look like? Will we see radical new policy experiments or incremental urban change? In reality, across the metropolitan landscape, we see both. Cities do what is possible within the constraints and resources they face. The work can be explicit or quiet. Polanyian push backs by cities are not new, and they don't always require a strong conscientization strategy (Warner and Clifton, 2014). In cities, like Barcelona, which epitomizes new municipalism, a more radical stance is possible (Russell, 2019). But in other, ordinary cities, like Tulsa, OK and Toledo, OH, progressive policies can be pursued even within a broader conservative environment. This gives hope. Embedded in pragmatic municipal policies (Kim and Warner, 2021), in the new imagination appearing in street level bureaucrats (Nicholls and Baran, 2024), in the innovation provided by community-based organizations and in the political pressure provided by social movements (Doussard and Schrock, 2025), we see the possibilities for progressive policy. These local experiments endure and lay the palimpsest for a more

progressive agenda at higher scales of government, when the window of political opportunity opens again.

The articles that follow lead off with Williams (2027), who extends Harvey's (2012) notion of "commoning" from public ownership to social relations and shows how Minneapolis residents developed their own concept of "neighbor" to support each other and make the right to the city real even in the face of military occupation from ICE. Lake (2027) follows with a call for a substantive politics to create policies that get at the structural roots of urban problems. That politics requires social mobilization, and Rosen (2027) describes how unions can be a force for social change with examples from cities across the US. Rodriguez (2027) then illustrates the power of unions when linked with anchor institutions like public schools to make substantive change on the ground in Chicago. New forms of ownership are also possibilities. Ehlenz (2027) showcases the potential of shared equity homeownership, and Friedline (2027) points to the potential of public banks. We then turn to ways in which city governments push back directly against authoritarian policies. Nicholls (2027) describes how urban coalitions have shifted from homeowners to renters, workers, bureaucrats and scholars who push progressive politics and the rise of democratic socialist mayors, as in NYC. Such pushback is not limited to large progressive cities, however. Kim (2027) describes how even small, rural and conservative places have been able to push back against ICE mega - detention centers by asserting their land use and infrastructure powers. All of these essays illustrate how, in a Polanyian sense, cities and social movements are asserting our collective humanity in the face of authoritarian and market efforts to suppress cities. As Williams (2027) notes, "Yes there is such a thing as society." This special issue illustrates how we can push back, even in dark times.

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