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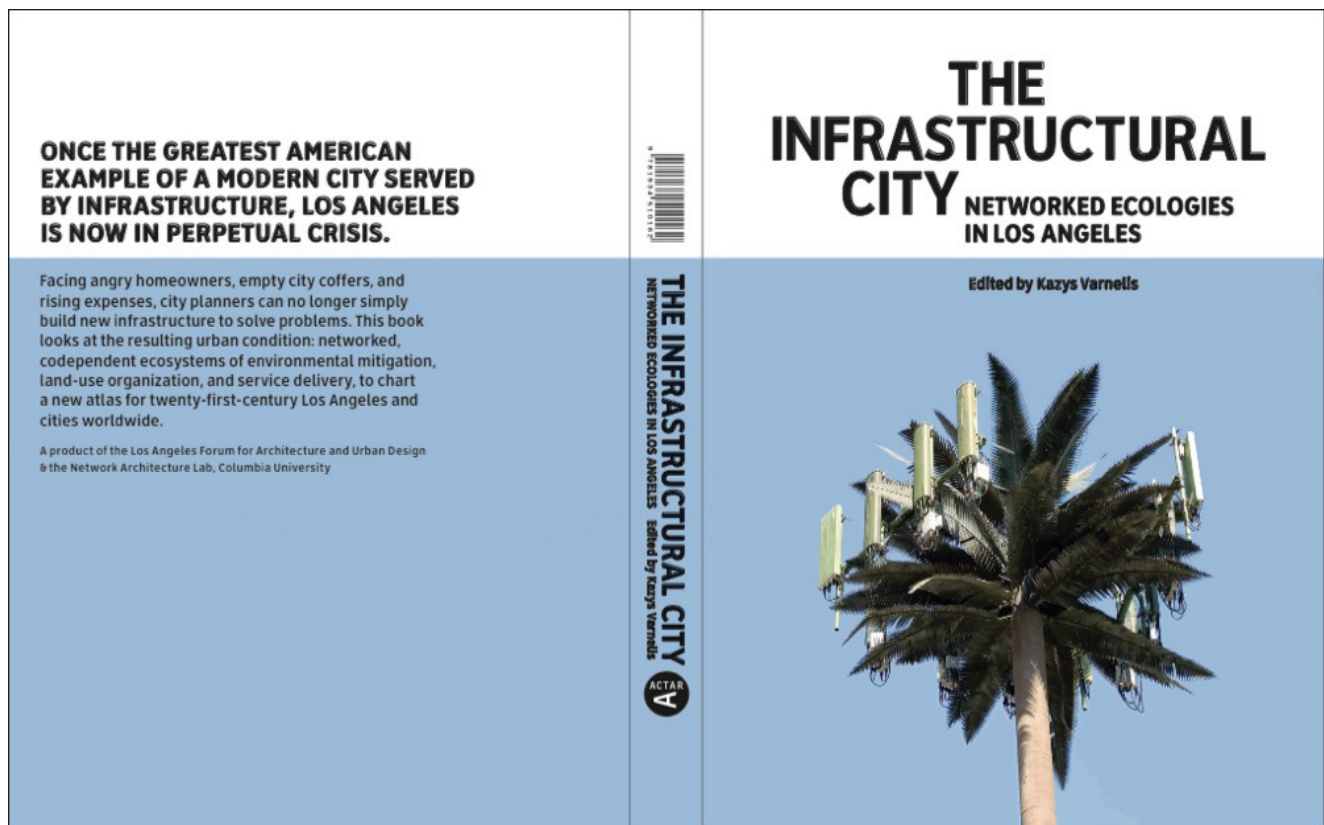
# After the Infrastructural City. On Abundance

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In 2008, we published *The Infrastructural City: Networked Ecologies in Los Angeles*. Our goal was to understand the metropolis through the lens of its underlying infrastructures. Rather than focusing on architecture or urban planning in isolation, the book examined how large-scale infrastructural systems—water, transportation, electricity, telecommunications—shaped urban form, social dynamics, and ecological relationships. By exploring Los Angeles as a paradigmatic modern city, the aim was to reveal how infrastructure, once the defining driver of urban growth and modernity, had begun to produce systemic crises and profound political impasses.



Infrastructure formed the core of Los Angeles's identity—indeed, infrastructure was the city's secular theology, its underlying belief system. Los Angeles arose not by accident or gradual organic growth but through deliberate acts of infrastructure: capturing distant rivers, electrifying deserts, and threading sprawling freeway systems across inhospitable terrain. Its birth represented human ingenuity overcoming ecological constraints. Yet by the dawn of the twenty-first century, this triumph had given way to crisis, an infrastructural impasse born directly from the city's prior successes.

The modernist vision of infrastructure had always been heroic: a technocratic dream of reshaping unruly nature into orderly, productive landscapes. Infrastructure provided secular salvation for the American West, turning deserts into farmland, canyons into reservoirs, and remote valleys into thriving suburbs. Los Angeles embodied this vision more vividly than any other American metropolis. From William Mulholland's aqueducts and the ambitious freeway system to distant electrical grids, the city's infrastructures were built at vast scales, each project reinforcing the belief that ecological and geographic limits could always be transcended.

Reyner Banham famously celebrated this infrastructural landscape in his 1971 book *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, describing the city through four interlocking ecological systems: Surfurbia (beach towns), Foothills (privileged hillside communities), Plains of Id (the sprawling, banal yet exuberant flatlands), and Autopia (the freeway network that tied it all together). Banham embraced Los Angeles as a decentralized, spontaneous city shaped by infrastructure rather than traditional urban planning. He valorized what he called "Non-Plan," a condition where bottom-up forces, consumer preferences, and private initiatives generated urban form free from bureaucratic constraints and grand masterplans. But by 2008, the consequences of Banham's Non-Plan were painfully evident. Instead of creating a liberating urban landscape, Non-Plan had set the stage for infrastructural dysfunction, political paralysis, and environmental degradation.

By the early 2000s, Los Angeles's infrastructures no longer reliably delivered their original promise. Instead, they produced chronic dysfunction: aqueducts drained distant ecosystems and provoked political conflict, freeways clogged almost immediately after opening, air basins remained perpetually polluted, and entrenched NIMBY politics stymied new infrastructural projects. Proposition 13, enacted in 1978, severely limited public funding, locking infrastructure into a state of permanent decay and inadequacy. Heroic infrastructure—massive, centralized, technocratic—had effectively come to an end. What emerged instead was a lasting infrastructural stalemate: political paralysis, ecological deterioration, and structural underinvestment.

Yet Los Angeles's experience was not unique. As Edward Soja pointed out, the city was both exception and rule: a singular example that revealed broader trends. The infrastructural impasse evident in Los Angeles reflected conditions across America—neoliberal governance, entrenched individualism, private interests dominating public goods, and widespread resistance to new development.

Infrastructure's future, then, would not be defined by grand heroic visions, but rather through difficult, continuous negotiations with ecological constraints, competing political demands, and limited resources. Seventeen years later, these fundamental issues persist: how can infrastructure meaningfully adapt, and can a compelling new vision emerge from what appears to be a landscape of perpetual impasse?

Shortly after *The Infrastructural City* appeared, Christopher Hawthorne, then architecture critic for the Los Angeles Times, reviewed it prominently on the front page of the Culture section (February 15, 2009). This should have been a pivotal moment, bringing attention to a project that had taken years to produce. Instead, Hawthorne condemned our book as overly pessimistic, arguing that our emphasis on invisible systems, regulatory complexities, and entrenched political barriers dismissed too quickly the potential for visible, iconic infrastructure projects created by architects like Foster and Koolhaas. Given how many years we spent working on the book—carefully documenting how infrastructural dysfunction arose from these very systemic conditions—such a cursory dismissal was disheartening.

In fairness to Hawthorne, although the call for infrastructural architecture is laughably naïve, he was writing in the hopeful early months of Barack Obama's presidency, when substantial investment in infrastructure seemed imminent through the stimulus package being developed in response to the financial crisis. His optimism reflected that brief historical moment. Had he written the review a few months later—once the limitations of the Obama administration's infrastructural policies became evident, as ambitious plans were significantly tempered by political compromises, regulatory inertia, and the economic approach of funding the banks favored by Director of the National Economic Council, Lawrence Summers, his assessment might have shifted dramatically.

Hawthorne's optimism about architectural solutions to infrastructural problems reflects a persistent pattern in American discourse: the belief that our systemic challenges require merely aesthetic or technical fixes rather than fundamental political-economic restructuring. This misdiagnosis has continued to shape infrastructure debates in the years since our book's publication. In retrospect, the optimistic viewpoint Hawthorne expressed—a belief that transformative infrastructure renewal was simply a matter of political will and visible design—is exactly the perspective Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson critique forcefully in their book *Abundance*. Klein and

Thompson underscore precisely what Hawthorne misunderstood and our book originally argued: that the infrastructural impasse cannot be resolved through aesthetic interventions or bold architectural gestures alone. Instead, they show that America's infrastructure problems remain stubbornly rooted in the invisible political-economic structures, regulatory barriers, and social conditions that we sought to reveal and that Hawthorne mistakenly overlooked.

Seventeen years after *The Infrastructural City*, the conditions described then have intensified rather than eased. Los Angeles remains trapped in infrastructural paralysis, reflecting a broader failure extending across California and, indeed, the United States as a whole. Little meaningful progress has been made in addressing fundamental urban crises—traffic congestion, housing affordability, ecological degradation—while political stalemates have deepened rather than resolved.

In Los Angeles specifically, infrastructure initiatives remain sporadic and insufficient. Ambitious projects promised decades ago, such as high-speed rail and comprehensive transit expansions, remain unrealized or delayed indefinitely. Traffic congestion has worsened, air quality improvements have stagnated, and despite efforts to promote transit-oriented development, the city still struggles with its legacy of automobile dependency. Water scarcity, predicted to become critical nearly two decades ago, is now acute, with the region stuck in cyclical drought emergencies while permanent solutions languish in political gridlock. Meanwhile, Proposition 13's legacy continues to limit revenue streams, ensuring persistent underinvestment in public infrastructure.

But these problems extend far beyond Los Angeles. Throughout California, similar infrastructural crises have emerged, emblematic of broader national trends. Housing shortages have driven soaring costs, contributing to an affordability crisis that increasingly drives young families out of the state. Homelessness, once confined to downtown skid rows, has become pervasive in cities large and small, from San Francisco and San Diego to Sacramento and Fresno. Public education and transit remain underfunded, overcrowded, or inadequate, while the state's famed climate initiatives repeatedly collide with stubborn local opposition and regulatory obstacles.

Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson, in their recent book *Abundance*, identify California explicitly as the paradigmatic example of this broader American infrastructural and political impasse. As they put it bluntly:

“California's problems are often distinct in their severity but not in their structure. The same dynamics are present in other blue states and cities. In this era of rising right-wing populism, there is pressure among liberals to focus only on the sins of the MAGA right. But this misses the contribution that liberal governance made to the rise of Trumpism. [...] Donald Trump

won by shifting almost every part of America to the right. But the signal Democrats should fear most is that the shift was largest in blue states and blue cities—the places where voters were most exposed to the day-to-day realities of liberal governance.”

Klein and Thompson’s argument underscores that the dysfunction found in California—highly regulated yet infrastructurally stagnant, rhetorically progressive yet practically conservative—is symptomatic of deeper national failures. States across the country share California’s fate, caught in regulatory entanglements, financial constraints, and political paralysis that make meaningful infrastructure impossible to build. Federal attempts at infrastructural renewal, such as the Biden administration’s Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, have struggled to break through entrenched local resistance and bureaucratic inertia. Even when funded, projects stall at the state and municipal levels, tangled in endless public hearings, lawsuits, and regulatory hurdles.

America in 2025 thus finds itself stuck in the impasse first described nearly two decades earlier in Los Angeles. Infrastructure, which once symbolized national strength and optimism, now stands as a monument to collective failure. The broader infrastructural gridlock, first identified at a local level, has become a national condition. The question posed in 2008 persists, now at an expanded scale: can America escape the structural trap of infrastructural impasse, or is permanent stagnation the new normal?

In their recent book *Abundance*, Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson offer perhaps the most compelling response yet to the infrastructural paralysis and political stalemate that have defined the last several decades. Their central thesis is straightforward but powerful: scarcity, particularly infrastructural scarcity, is not inevitable but chosen. America’s inability to build housing, transit, clean energy projects, and critical infrastructure is fundamentally a political problem, rooted in policy failures, regulatory barriers, and entrenched political and ideological opposition rather than technical or economic limitations. This argument reframes infrastructural impasse not as destiny but as an active political choice—a choice that can be reversed.

Klein and Thompson argue that both sides of the American political spectrum bear responsibility for the present stagnation. Conservatives, committed to shrinking government and relying exclusively on market solutions, have systematically undermined the public sector’s capacity to execute ambitious projects. Progressives, meanwhile, despite their rhetorical commitments, have often obstructed meaningful development through excessive regulation, overly cautious environmental policies, and local NIMBY resistance. The outcome has been pervasive paralysis and disillusionment—particularly visible in progressive strongholds like California.

Yet Klein and Thompson are not pessimists. They present a positive, forward-looking vision of what could be accomplished if political will aligned with technological capability. A new infrastructural abundance—marked by rapid housing construction, widespread deployment of renewable energy, modernized transportation networks, and equitable urban growth—is entirely achievable, they assert, provided regulatory and ideological barriers are dismantled and public ambitions are renewed. Their solution is clear: the United States must build more, faster, and smarter, to address chronic shortages in housing, energy, healthcare infrastructure, and transportation. Abundance, in their view, represents not merely an economic or technological goal but a necessary political project—a pathway out of the stasis and frustrations of contemporary American life. Their central solutions involve streamlining regulatory processes, significantly accelerating permitting timelines, boosting public investments in infrastructure projects, and revitalizing government agencies' capacities to execute ambitious, large-scale developments.

Moreover, *Abundance* explicitly acknowledges California as the critical testing ground for this new politics of infrastructure. Klein and Thompson argue forcefully that the progressive vision must be more than merely redistributive—it must also be productive. As they point out, liberal governance should proudly demonstrate its ability to build better futures through tangible achievements in housing, transit, and ecological resilience. Their critique of California's political dysfunction thus doubles as a call to action for progressives nationwide to reclaim their heritage as builders, innovators, and infrastructural pioneers.

In positioning infrastructure as a core political issue, Klein and Thompson validate much of the analysis presented nearly two decades ago in *The Infrastructural City*. Infrastructure remains fundamental not only to urban life but also to social equity, environmental sustainability, and national prosperity. But their emphasis differs importantly in its optimism: infrastructure, rather than a relic of past ambition, can once again become a catalyst for transformative change, provided political courage matches technological potential.

Thus, *Abundance* offers an ambitious and necessary answer to the stalemates described in 2008. Their vision suggests a compelling alternative to decades of resignation, pointing the way toward meaningful urban renewal, ecological recovery, and broadly shared prosperity—if only political actors can move beyond the entrenched interests and ideological inertia that have defined recent American history.

Despite the optimism of Klein and Thompson's vision, their analysis overlooks a critical dimension shaping the infrastructural and political future: demographic contraction, or what can be termed "actually-existing degrowth." Unlike the eco-leftist advocacy of voluntary degrowth—an

understandable, politically driven attempt to shrink populations and economies deliberately and ethically—actually-existing degrowth describes the unplanned, ongoing, and increasingly rapid demographic decline occurring across much of the developed world. Populations are already shrinking significantly in countries like Japan, South Korea, and numerous European nations, driven by persistently low fertility rates, aging populations, and intensifying migration pressures. This phenomenon, increasingly evident even in the United States, signals a profound structural shift that will fundamentally reshape urban and infrastructural planning in coming decades.

As I have done before, I will again borrow novelist William Gibson's evocative term "the Jackpot" to refer to this unfolding demographic transition. Rather than a sudden apocalyptic population collapse, the Jackpot describes a slower, distributed unraveling—a prolonged and uneven demographic downturn, intensified by climate stress, economic instability, and shifting cultural values. In the United States, signs of the Jackpot's approach are increasingly clear: declining birthrates, shrinking rural and small-town populations, aging demographics, and regional depopulation. If infrastructure planning and political visions adopt the *Abundance* agenda but fail to acknowledge this demographic reality, the country risks investing in futures that will never materialize, preparing for continued growth while confronting the steady reality of shrinkage.

Crucially, demographic contraction coincides with—and is amplified by—the rise of Artificial Intelligence. Rather than viewing AI merely as a threat stealing jobs, it can instead be embraced as a tool to ease the social and economic adjustments required by shrinking populations. AI's widespread deployment is already reshaping labor markets, significantly reducing demand for traditional labor across industries. This shift could alleviate some economic pressures posed by a shrinking workforce, helping facilitate a smoother transition toward sustainable, high-quality urban life. Yet precisely how we harness AI while mitigating the profound disruptions likely from automation—especially the potential mass displacement in service and intellectual sectors previously insulated from the upheavals experienced by industrial labor during post-Fordism—is perhaps the most critical question we face regarding AI today. No matter how challenging this is for many progressives—who often view AI as deeply flawed or irredeemably captured by corporate interests—AI-optimized infrastructures, such as smart energy grids, autonomous transit systems, predictive healthcare networks, and intelligent urban management platforms, can help societies navigate demographic contraction efficiently and equitably. In this scenario, infrastructural abundance becomes redefined: not merely building more, but building better—investing in adaptive, intelligent infrastructures that enhance human and ecological well-being as populations decline.

Nearly two decades after the infrastructural impasse first articulated in *The Infrastructural City*, America finds itself at a critical juncture. The stagnation and paralysis of infrastructure that we diagnosed in Los Angeles have now spread across California and the United States. Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson's vision in *Abundance* offers a welcome antidote, reframing infrastructural scarcity as a political choice and calling for renewed public ambition, regulatory reform, and strategic investment. Their optimistic perspective rightly identifies infrastructure not merely as a technical necessity but as a crucial political project—a pathway toward broader social and ecological renewal.

However, integrating the Jackpot scenario into the abundance argument demands redefining abundance itself. Rather than pursuing endless quantitative expansion, infrastructure must become adaptive, resilient, and oriented toward ecological regeneration and urban livability. A future of smaller populations offers genuine opportunities: cities redesigned around quality of life rather than growth alone, restored ecosystems, and revitalized urban spaces characterized by abundant green infrastructure, sustainable energy systems, and human-scale design.

Yet achieving this vision faces political headwinds. The political Right increasingly portrays degrowth and adaptive urban strategies as part of a conspiratorial 'Great Reset,' framing necessary adaptations as threats to personal freedom, economic prosperity, and American cultural identity. This ideological stance complicates practical discussions about managed shrinkage by conflating sustainability with politically charged fears of elite control, making constructive bipartisan solutions harder to achieve. Yet a realistic reckoning must still occur in declining areas. Citizens need to be actively brought into the planning process, clearly addressing their understandable anxieties and explicitly answering the fundamental question: 'What can we do to make things better for our communities if the population continues to fall?'

Fortunately, this strategy doesn't require reinventing the wheel. Europe and Japan have long developed successful methods for managing urban shrinkage. For instance, Youngstown, Ohio's Youngstown 2010 explicitly acknowledged population decline, consolidating services and converting vacant lots into urban agriculture. However, implementation remained limited due to persistent economic challenges, limited municipal resources, and political resistance to fully abandoning growth-oriented strategies. Nonetheless, it represents an instructive American precedent in accepting shrinkage explicitly. Japan's compact city policies, exemplified in Toyama, have strategically concentrated development around transit nodes, allowing peripheral zones to revert gradually to nature and creating more vibrant, walkable urban cores despite overall population decline. Detroit's strategic framework similarly strives to establish higher-density neighborhoods

surrounded by green infrastructure and innovative urban agriculture. These examples demonstrate how thoughtfully managed shrinkage can lead to more sustainable, livable urban environments.

Thus, infrastructure after growth represents not a reduction of ambition but a recalibration of priorities toward genuinely sustainable abundance. Given these realities, it is clear that nearly two decades after *The Infrastructural City* diagnosed systemic infrastructural paralysis rooted in political, ecological, and regulatory impasses, America can break this deadlock by embracing the Abundance agenda—curtailing excessive governmental constraints and strategically collaborating with industry to advance technological innovation. Rejecting identity politics that frame society as composed of factions competing over an ever-dwindling pie, this vision instead offers tangible improvements in everyday life: lower costs of living, better public services, cleaner air and water, strengthened local economies, and greater accessibility. Yet confronting the emotionally appealing but misleading nostalgia of MAGA requires political leaders to subtly and thoughtfully reframe demographic contraction and technological transformation as opportunities rather than threats. Persuasive political figures must communicate effectively, demonstrating through concrete examples how thoughtful management of decline can further enhance quality of life and ecological sustainability. Ultimately, resolving the infrastructural impasse identified nearly two decades ago demands not only wise policies but compelling voices capable of articulating a credible, hopeful vision of ecological restoration, social renewal, and enduring resilience.