SPECIAL SECTION

He's a builder, but does Trump have an urban agenda?

Mark Davidson 🄳

Graduate School of Geography, Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts, USA

Correspondence
Mark Davidson, Graduate School of Geography, Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts, USA.
Email: mdavidson@clarku.edu

Abstract

For 20 years, turbulence has defined American urbanism. In the late noughties, a global financial crisis pushed many US cities to the brink of bankruptcy. Austerity followed, with belt-tightening squeezing city services. Then came Trump, then came COVID. The pandemic would, unpredictably, make US cities cash rich thanks to the Federal government's largesse. And now we await Trump 2.0. For US cities the prospect of radical change seems real. But what type of reform will Trump bring? Herein lies the difficulty. Trump 2.0 is as hard to predict as the first version was. Immigration, tariff reform and government efficiency are currently Trump's domestic talking points. Yet we have little idea about what precisely will be done across all these policy arenas. This is a pressing conundrum for urban scholarship since each arena will impact the future of US cities. This reflection will assess how US cities are entering into the incoming Trump presidency and consider two possible versions of urban reform under Trump: the unlikely 'coordinated version', and the more likely 'uncoordinated version' defined by Trump's populist politics.

KEYWORDS

government, housing, municipal, Trump, urban development, urban geography

1 | INTRODUCTION

It was either Niels Bohr or Yogi Berra who said: 'It is difficult to make predictions, especially about the future'. As we await a second Trump presidency, the phrase has never been more apt. It seems unlikely, but not impossible, that the president-elect could usher in a sustained, coherent urban agenda. He has certainly been vocal enough about the state of America's cities. During an election event in Philadelphia, Trump talked about the city being 'ravaged by bloodshed' (Layne & Slattery, 2024). Of Detroit, he said the city had become emblematic of the nation's decline (Murdoch, 2024). For Trump, America's cities epitomise its fall from greatness. By extension, Trump's hat-adorning slogan—'Make America Great Again'—might suggest he has grand plans for an era of urban renewal?

Electoral speeches are strong on promises, and Trump has never been one for laborious policymaking. Safe to say, Trump's recent comments about American cities are not those of a concerned urbanist. To some extent they simply reflect the troubles US cities experienced through, and because of, the pandemic. But they are also a function of Trump's desire

to cultivate the country's enduring political divides (Accordino, 2019). When Trump talks about American cities, he is usually bashing his Democrat opponents.

And yet, despite all the anti-urban rhetoric and false claims, this strategy won Trump votes. In 2020, Trump trailed Biden by 34% of the vote in large metros. By 2024, this margin had shrunk to 25%. This inroad into Democratic strongholds was the largest of all Trump's 2024 geographic gains (Kolko, 2023). The only two voting blocs that swung harder to Trump were Hispanics (14%) and Native Americans (11%). Interpretations of this shift vary. Some have claimed that America's rural/urban divide is now shrinking (Islam & Crego, 2024), with urban blue-collar votes shifting towards Trump and the Republican party (Mahtesian, 2024). Others have argued that Trump's gains are a function of growing urban problems (Gelinas, 2021) and, in some cases, the related failing of Democratic political regimes (Badger & Parlapiano, 2024).

A programmatic urban policy agenda could develop in Trump 2.0 if he leans into the Heritage Foundation's *Project 2025*. This manifesto, one that Trump has both embraced and rejected, sets out an ideologically consistent conservative blueprint for housing reform. Ben Carson, a familiar Trump loyalist, authored *Project 2025's* chapter on housing. In it, Carson proposes a small state, deregulatory Federal housing agenda, while also seeking to protect America's sprawling, 'family friendly' suburbs. Much of this aligns closely with the president-in-waiting's current mood music. And Carson's proposed slashing of Federal funding—including Community Block Grants, Section 8 housing vouchers and the Low-Income Tax Credit (LITC)—certainly mirrors Elon Musk's 'government efficiency' visioning. Although Section 8 and the LITC are recognised as distinctly neoliberal programmes (i.e., they provide a public subsidy to private entities to facilitate market solutions), their sudden termination would almost certainly worsen the current housing crisis.

An implemented *Project 2025* would radically reshape American housing and urban governance. There are two main strands of the agenda: governmental and ideological reform. Key to both would be the radical reinvention, if not complete dismantling, of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Under Carson's plan, reforms would include government employees being replaced with political appointees and the Federal government progressively delegating responsibility for housing to state and local governments. This would amount to a radical downloading of fiscal responsibility, with state and local governments taking on budget busting functions without federal assistance.

HUD's fiscal year 2025 discretionary budget is $72.6 billion, with an additional $185 billion requested for mandatory affordable housing investment. HUD's discretionary budget funds the Housing Choice Voucher Program ($241 million), homeless assistance grants ($4.1 billion), lead control programs ($417 million), and energy efficiency and climate mitigation work ($407 million), among other programmes. Should Trump listen to his *Project 2025* advisors, this spending will be dramatically cut, leaving state and local governments with onerous spending and service demands. Given many American cities already face growing housing affordability (DeSilver, 2024) and homelessness (Napolitano, 2024) crises, not one city currently has the fiscal capacity to take up these responsibilities (Funkhouser, 2024). Indeed, these crises are already being inadequately triaged and calls for Federal assistance are growing.

Of course, such cuts might not be unexpected. It is a staple of the political right to decry government spending, and a growing Federal deficit will necessitate spending cutbacks at some point. What therefore makes *Project 2025* remarkable is the ideological agenda that accompanies it. Here we find buzz words and phrases including 'economic self-sufficiency', 'anti-marriage bias', 'upward mobility' and 'modernized business mindset', signalling that something more distinctive could emerge with Trump 2.0.

Project 2025 proposes a reinvigoration of the 'American Dream' via protection and promotion of the archetypal suburb. This is an unbridled urban romantism: white picket fence, 2.4 children, traditional family structures, children playing in the street, and so on. *Project 2025* claims that the Federal government has been primarily responsible for killing its utopia. Progressive US governments are deemed to have chipped away at the fabric of American modernity, bringing with it market distortion, corrupting ideologies, wrongheaded climate action and bureaucratisation. To reinstall and repair American (suburban) life, *Project 2025* proposes the removal of the Federal government's malign influence from the urban process.

Here urban and housing reform under Trump could be expansive. Installing the Heritage Foundation's vision of American suburban modernity would not be restricted to urban and/or housing policy. Rather we are talking about radical social change, where tax policies would likely be the primary vehicles for protecting the (suburban) way of life so valorised in *Project 2025*. The coordinated version of urban policy under Trump 2.0 would therefore not see a hands-on government-led coordination of urban development. Instead, a deregulated urban process would be restructured by the reorganisation and imposition of fiscal costs and benefits. This would further steer future urban development into urban cores and dilute efforts to reduce energy consumption across America's sprawling suburbs.

But let's put the brakes on this sketching out of a coordinated Trump 2.0 urban agenda. The whole idea behind *Project 2025* is to package up a conservative policy script for an incoming administration needing one. Its job is to convey

coherence. Yet we learnt from Trump 1.0 that coherence and consistency are not core values. While parts of *Project 2025* will probably make their way into Trump's administration, other political priorities will dictate much that happens in US cities. Quite how these priorities are acted upon (or not), and how they interact, is anyone's guess. A great deal will depend on what happens when Trump's rhetoric meets the legal and political realities of government in Washington.

Immigration and tariffs will be central to Trump's first 18 months in office. Quite how is less clear. Trump has proposed scrapping income taxes and replacing lost fiscal revenues with new import tariffs. Most economists have concluded that the proposal is nonsensical. On immigration, Trump has proposed the mass deportation of America's 11 million undocumented migrants. It is estimated that deporting one million migrants would cost around $88 billion. So, again, most analysts are assuming that Trump's 'plans' on immigration are unrealistic. We are therefore left to trace out the basic outline of what Trump's wandering thoughts on immigration and tariffs could mean for US cities.

If Trump initiates a deportation programme, it will change America's urban geographies. Migrants have overwhelmingly gravitated to US cities, and particularly those places that offer support and services. We will therefore see 'Blue State' cities, such as New York and San Francisco, de facto becoming the targets of deportation programmes. New York City has seen over 210,000 undocumented migrants arrive since 2022 (Ferré-Sadurní, 2024) and it has a legal obligation to shelter them (Barron, 2024). Mayor Adams has called this a 'humanitarian crisis' and said that it will cost New York City $12 billion per year to house and service its growing migrant population (Mays, 2023). Already stretched city services are consequently being pushed to breaking point (Wang et al., 2023). Similar stories of an unprecedent crisis are coming from other large metros—Los Angeles, Houston, Dallas, Miami, Chicago and Washington DC (Passel & Cohn, 2019).

The means and methods Trump eventually uses to implement immigration reform will be critical to defining what types of impact we see. If Trump focuses on limiting flows of migrants across the border, this could be welcomed by mayors like Eric Adams. Migrant arrivals are creating resource demands well beyond the capabilities of even the wealthiest American cities. On the other hand, if the Trump administration places the burden on states and cities to address undocumented migration and enact deportation, budgets and services could deteriorate quickly. Trump could also tie federal funds to locally enacted deportation measures. Put all this together and low-income urban neighbourhoods are facing the nightmarish prospect of depopulation, sudden declines in economic activity, and worsening relations with local law enforcement.

If Trump's first term is anything to go by, we can expect little hesitancy about making life harder for Democratic state and cities. Last time around, Trump's revisions to the tax code meant residents in predominantly Democratic-controlled states and cities saw an increased fiscal burden (Milligan, 2021). Many commentators are now suggesting that further changes to the tax code are the most probable mechanism the new administration will use to require state and local government action of undocumented migrants (Bruno, 2025). The fiscal disparities between 'blue' and 'red' America could therefore widen.

As details of Trump's legislative agenda emerge, we are slowly learning more about what fiscal reform will look like. It does seem likely that Trump will support legislation to tax the remittances of undocumented migrants (Brown, 2024). Republican South Dakota Senator John Thune has announced legislation to impose a 50% levy on remittances, prospectively raising around $23 billion per year. This alone will not cover the cost of Trump's deportation plans, which are estimated by some to be around $315 billion (American Immigration Council, 2024). The geographical impact of remittance taxation will be complex. Within American borders, remittance services are predominantly located in low-income urban neighbourhoods (Guermond, 2022). Higher taxation rates within these communities would produce more precarious, and perhaps unviable, circumstances. For remittance destinations, the restricted flow of resources from the Global North into the Global South would produce powerful deleterious effects (Rodríguez-Sánchez, 2023).

So far, we can therefore conjecture that Democrat-controlled cities and low-income neighbourhoods are on the frontlines of Trump's coming immigration reforms. And here immigration reform will intersect with two other wicked urban problems. The first is housing affordability. Since the pandemic, most metropolitan centres have seen housing prices grow rapidly. Democrat-controlled cities have had some of the steepest increases (Rim, 2024). When you map housing affordability onto the migration crisis, you find cities like San Francisco and New York face a compounding problem. They are experiencing growing immigration and service demands, alongside a chronic need to produce more affordable housing for existing communities. It remains to be seen whether Trump's administration will be sensitive to the budgetary tightrope being walked by cities in this predicament.

The second wicked problem is fiscal health. Since the pandemic, many US cities have been riding high on federal stimulus spending. Many cities' budgetary sins—under-funded pensions, growing healthcare spending, one-time revenues covering ongoing expenditures—have been covered up by Federal aid that came with few stipulations. But stimulus monies are now mostly spent, and cities are again reckoning with leaner budgets (Kaab Omeyr et al., 2024). If Trump

instigates any amount of fiscal downloading to state and local governments, it will come at a moment where artificially inflated fiscal health is quickly deflating (Funkhouser, 2024). In other words, a new period of politically induced austerity could rapidly arrive for some cities.

2 | CONCLUSIONS

While existing urban geographies give us some clues to how Trump's agenda will play out, it remains very hard to predict how any part of his agenda will jive with others. Take the relations between immigration and tariffs, both central to Trump's election stump. Proposed tariff reforms—at this point, this might be better described as the weaponisation of tariffs—verges on the fantastical: tariffs replacing income taxes, 65% import levies, and so on. This leaves any analyst guessing on what the reality of tariff reform will look like, and by extension, which cities will be most impacted. For example, Trump's instinctive protection of US steel and/or auto manufacturing might bolster some long-struggling urban economies, including Democratic cities prospectively caught up in immigration action. Alternative scenarios could see booming red state cities becoming the beneficiaries of tariff reforms shaped by Trump's realpolitik.

Some commentators are suggesting that Trump 2.0 will be a more prepared and methodical administration. However, Trump maintains the rhetoric of a disruptor. The domestic problems he faces—migration, deficits, housing affordability, living standards, and so on—will necessitate action. But without meaningful and considered coordination, the conditions for a perfect storm exist: some US cities could get hit from multiple directions. Any new Federal administration brings with it change. However, Trump makes it more likely that radical and disproportionate change occurs. This could take the form of the wholesale implementation of *Project 2025* or a set of short-term populist actions. Your guess is as good as mine.

I'm certainly pessimistic about the chances of considered coordination. Although Trump's second presidency will bring with it experience, it is hard to imagine his chaotic approach will be replaced with Ciceronian statecraft. Urban scholarship will therefore face another challenging period. Usually, urban scholars can assume that the devil is in the details: funding tweaks shift geographical targeting, well intentioned reforms have unintended consequences, short-term measures generate long-term changes, and so on. But with Trump, these assumptions do not hold as firmly. The spectrum of possibilities greatly expands under a disrupter like Trump. But we cannot assume transformation. Chaos can also mean stasis. Dysfunction rarely converts into constructive action. For one, Musk, and his ambitions to cut $2 trillion of Federal spending, could quickly end up being just another of Trump's hired and fired appointees.

At this point we are still at the stage of trying to parse out the rhetoric and figure out how any of it makes its way into Congress. Then again, with Trump we are always trying to figure out if the bloviation is anything more than self-promotion and demagoguery. There is always a chance it is, and this should make America's cash-strapped and fiscally burdened cities particularly worried.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
None.

ORCID
Mark Davidson https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0012-4540

REFERENCES
Accordino, J. (2019) Introduction to bridging the 'urban–rural divide'. *State and Local Government Review*, 51(4), 217–222. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1177/0160323X20932624
American Immigration Council (2024) Mass deportation devastating costs to America, its budget and economy. Available from: https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/mass-deportation
Badger, E. & Parlapiano, A. (2024) Is the Urban Shift Toward Trump Really About Democratic Cities in Disarray? The New York Times. Available from: https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/06/upshot/urban-vote-shift-trump.html [Accessed: 26th April, 2025].
Barron, J. (2024) Shelters are overloaded. Will a new agreement help? *The New York Times*. Available from: https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/18/nyregion/shelters-are-overloaded-will-a-new-agreement-help.html [Accessed: 19th December, 2024].

Brown, R. (2024) Trump's comeback could disrupt Latin America's remittances. *Americas Quarterly*. Available from: https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/trumps-comeback-could-disrupt-latin-americas-remittances/ [Accessed: 7th January, 2025].

Bruno, M. (2025) Trump's tax reform plans and impact on Cross-Border M&A. *The National Law Review*. Available from: https://natlawreview.com/article/how-cross-border-ma-may-be-impacted-trump-administration-tax-reform [Accessed: 7th January, 2025].

DeSilver, D. (2024) A look at the state of affordable housing in the U.S. *Pew Research Center*. Available from: https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/10/25/a-look-at-the-state-of-affordable-housing-in-the-us/ [Accessed: 7th January, 2025].

Ferré-Sadurní, L. (2024) What to know about the migrant crisis in New York City. *The New York Times*. Available from: https://www.nytimes.com/article/nyc-migrant-crisis-explained.html [Accessed: 19th December, 2024].

Funkhouser, M. (2024) *The mother of all fiscal cliffs is coming. Here are three ways local governments can prepare*. Available from: http://eepurl.com/i57fzM [Accessed: 7th January, 2025].

Gelinas, N. (2021) Data proves it: Pandemic is no excuse for NYC's rising tide of violent crime. *Manhattan Institute*. Available from: https://manhattan.institute/article/data-proves-it-pandemic-is-no-excuse-for-nycs-rising-tide-of-violent-crime/ [Accessed: 10th January, 2025].

Guermond, V. (2022) Remittance-Scapes: The contested geographies of remittance management. *Progress in Human Geography*, 46(2), 372–397. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325211033645

Islam, F. & Crego, E. (2024) Narrowing the urban-rural divide. *Medium*. Available from: https://21stcenturycivics.medium.com/narrowing-the-urban-rural-divide-00635bc3d9e6 [Accessed: 7th January, 2025].

Kaab Omeyr, F., Bauer, J. & Montes Diaz, I. (2024) How ARPA funds helped stabilize budgets & investment in municipal services. *National League of Cities*. Available from: https://www.nlc.org/article/2024/03/05/how-arpa-funds-helped-stabilize-budgets-investing-in-municipal-services/ [Accessed: 7th January, 2025].

Kolko, J. (2023) *Breaking down the election results*. Available from: https://www.slowboring.com/p/breaking-down-the-election-results?utm_medium=email [Accessed: 19th December, 2024].

Layne, N. & Slattery, G. (2024) Trump courts black voters in Philadelphia, asks Christians to Back him one last time. *Reuters*. Available from: https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-speak-christian-group-then-court-black-vote-philadelphia-2024-06-22/ [Accessed: 19th December, 2024].

Mahtesian, C. (2024) The stunning geography of Trump's victory. *Politico*. Available from: https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/11/08/donald-trump-win-electoral-map-00187135 [Accessed: 19th December, 2024].

Mays, J.C. (2023) Mayor Adams says migrant influx will cost New York City $12 billion. *The New York Times*. Available from: https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/09/nyregion/adams-nyc-migrants-cost.html [Accessed: 19th December, 2024].

Milligan, S. (2021) The war against New Jersey (and other blue states). *US News & World Report*. Available from: https://www.usnews.com/news/the-report/articles/2021-11-26/democratic-states-battle-over-salt-tax-rules [Accessed: 7th January, 2025].

Murdoch, R. (2024) Donald Trump again takes aim at Detroit: 'It's never come Back'. *FOX 2 Detroit*. Available from: https://www.fox2detroit.com/news/donald-trump-again-takes-aim-detroit-its-never-come-back [Accessed: 19th December, 2024].

Napolitano, E. (2024) Record number of Americans are homeless amid nationwide surge in rent, report finds. *CBS News*. Available from: https://www.cbsnews.com/news/rent-homelessness-harvard-report-center-for-housing-studies/ [Accessed: 7th January, 2025].

Passel, J.S. & Cohn, D. (2019) Most U.S. unauthorized immigrants live in just 20 metro areas. *Pew Research Center*. Available from: https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/03/11/us-metro-areas-unauthorized-immigrants/ [Accessed: 19th December, 2024].

Rim, H. (2024) Home prices hit all-time high—Led by these cities. *Forbes*. Available from: https://www.forbes.com/sites/hyunsoorim/2024/04/30/home-prices-soar-to-all-time-high-here-are-the-fastest-growing-cities/ [Accessed: 19th December, 2024].

Rodríguez-Sánchez, J.I. (2023) An economic lifeline? How remittances from the US impact Mexico's economy. *Baker Institute*. Available from: https://www.bakerinstitute.org/research/economic-lifeline-how-remittances-us-impact-mexicos-economy [Accessed: 7th January, 2025].

Wang, Y., Warner, M. E. & Sipple, J. W. (2023) Sharing spaces: Joint use service delivery in New York state school districts. *Community Development*, 54(4), 567–587. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330.2023.2217900