

Transcript of Alex Schafran, *The Spatial Contract*, talk given at the Institute for Metropolitan Studies, November 18, 2021.

Welcome to the *Spatial Contract* Over the next 45 minutes, I am going to walk you through the core ideas of this book, which was co-authored with the philosopher Matthew Noah Smith and the energy geographer Stephen Hall.

Now I hope that the second you heard the term philosopher, that served as a trigger warning that this is a book of ideas, not a history book or a policy manual. While it is very much about housing, transportation, energy, water, food systems, education, health care and so many of the other systems we rely upon for daily life, it focuses on the politics of those systems. It's a framework, or really a set of frameworks, for thinking about both politics and these systems in a different way.

If you are looking for my ideas on housing policy in the coming legislative session in Sacramento or on the specific political strategies that concerned housers should take in California to build a better politics, this is not that lecture. That material is coming, and stay tuned for my substack newsletter and some podcast action an all manner of very practical ideas over the next few month and years.

This book is about gut rehabbing our politics, about stripping the engine and putting it back together - please don't say I didn't warn you.

Like with so many political books, I think it is important to talk about where it came from.

Let's go back to the last time I gave a book talk here at the IMS, back in 2018. The subject at that time was my book *The Road to Resegregation*, which chronicled how the richest and supposedly most progressive region in the world became the epicenter of a very racialized foreclosure crisis.

Understandably, many people focus on the first part of the title - resegregation - how di a million people, mostly people of color, ended up in far away suburbs with brutal commutes while the core of the region gentrified. But the *Road to Resegregation* isn't an argument that Northern California resegregated - it takes that as a fact.

Most of the book is about why. How did this happen? How did we allow it to happen even as leaders and planners knew it was happening for decades and were unable to stop it? How did a region and a state where most people agree on war, abortion and gay rights not come to agreement on housing and transportation and land use policy?

Most of the book is about this failure of a very large group of people to come to an agreement to make the basic stuff we all need to survive and thrive. Most of the book is about the second part of the title - what I call the failure of politics.

What is the failure of politics? How can politics fail if politics doesn't have any inherent purpose? I mean you would be right to ask whether politics isn't just all debates and discussions and fights we have about almost everything, what I sometimes like to think of as 'the noise'. I mean everything is or can be political - if we didn't know that before the events of the past few years, we certainly do now.

But faced with the gross failure of this region and this state which I love so much, I realized that we need to start thinking about politics different. Yes, everything is political, and politics is embedded in everything humans touch. But not all politics is the same, and more importantly, not all politics has to be the same.

Above anything else, The Spatial Contract is an argument and a plea and a cry in the dark that we need to start seeing about the politics of housing and transport and energy and development and planning differently than other types of politics. The politics of these systems, where the fight should be over how and where and for whom and at what cost, not yes or no or right and wrong, is the kind of politics that has to be effective.

In other words, it has to work.

Now this idea of politics having to work is ludicrous to most folks trained in political science. I vividly recall an argument I had with a political scientist from the fancier end of California public higher education. You can picture me walking on 23rd and Alabama in the Mission district gesticulating wildly with my headphones attached as I try to convince him that housing politics should have a purpose, while other politics do not.

Take for instance abortion, or war. When we debate these things, consensus is not only not the goal, it's basically impossible. These are questions of yes or no, right or wrong. But housing and transport and energy and water are things that everyone needs. The fights are - or should be - over who gets them, how and where we build them, who pays, at what cost. The fight is almost always over the terms or location of the deal, not whether the world would be a better place without energy systems or houses or people moving around.

Accepting that the politics of these systems, as I will increasingly call them, can and should be different from other types of politics, is the first step towards rebuilding them.

I hope this makes some sense, and if it doesn't, that it becomes clearer as this talk goes on. Now I want to take a step back. We're going down to the base of politics, or to keep going with the cheap built environment metaphors for my planner and architecture people, to the piles we've driven into the earth to support the foundation which supports the building which is our political life. We need to get a bit deeper into these systems around which we want to build a new politics. Remember, I warned you that there would be philosophy, and here we are.

Let's start with a definition. Freedom = Agency, or the ability to act. To be free is to be able to act. So what makes a person free to walk down a road or cross a bridge? First, the person is able to walk - there is definitely a portion of agency or freedom wrapped up in your body, and all of our bodies are different. But if you are talking about walking down a path or over a bridge, there is a lot more to it than your body or personal ability. In addition to that basic capacity to walk, there can't be obstacles - physical barriers or laws or armed bad people or social norms preventing the person from walking down the road. The absence of barriers is super important, and this is often what people think about when they think of freedom. Freedom to many people is nobody stopping you from doing something - nobody standing in your way of walking down the road or crossing the bridge. But this understanding of freedom forgets one crucial thing. Somebody - and probably not you - built the damn road or bridge in the first place.

The freedom to walk down the road - or live in a house, or have electricity - is actually two very different freedoms. To be free from something - i.e. when nobody or nuthin' is standing in your way - what are called negative freedoms.

The freedom that comes because something exists - freedom to live in a house because there is a house - are called positive freedoms - the freedoms to do something.

For the purpose of trying to this about the politics of housing and energy and transport etc. differently, this is a vital distinction. And it reminds us of something critical, especially here in the United States.

Freedom doesn't just come because someone or somebody didn't stop you from doing something. We have to embrace the fact that our freedom ALSO - and I emphasize ALSO - comes because things got built and maintained.

Housing systems, energy systems, transport and mobility systems, these systems can make us free, can allow us to do things, but only if they exist - and exist in the right way in the right place at the right time under the right terms of the deal.

You aren't free to walk down the road if there is no road, you're not free to go to school if there is no school. Sure, perhaps it can be a virtual school these days, but as many people on this webinar know, that too requires infrastructure and working systems. You're not free to survive a polar vortex in Texas if your electricity system doesn't work. You're not free to have a healthy holiday season if hundreds of thousands of people didn't work for decades to build a scientific-industrial complex that could make a vaccine for COVID.

If we want a better politics of these vital systems, the most foundational point we as planners and policymakers and thinkers and doers all need to start making is that these systems are a huge part of what makes us free. If we don't start connecting working systems to people's freedom, we will not last long in the fight against either climate disaster or growing inequality.

Another way to think about these systems and the freedoms they can give us when they work: We rely on systems to make the roads in order to be free to walk down the road... or live in a house... or turn on the lights... or cook, or bathe, etc. We thus call these reliance systems. Now it isn't the sexiest of terms, and it doesn't translate well into Spanish sadly, but we think that it is worth it to get folks focused on how we rely on things.

Reliance systems enable us to act.

In philosophical terms, they give us agency.

In American terms, they give us freedom.

Now we are at a fortuitous moment, as for the most sustained and constructive period I can remember, we are actually talking about these systems and how to fund them. Now we use the term reliance systems, but we can also call them **infrastructure**.

The key is to just remember all the people and organizations - and sure, even the politicians - behind the concrete. It's not just the pipes and the wires etc. that make us free, it is the larger system which plans, builds and maintains it. For after all, it is also this system which gets it wrong, or gets it right and then has to fix it because of climate change or other reasons.

The freedom only comes when you have the larger system, and of course, when it works.

One other positive thing about the current infrastructure discussion is that we are thinking more broadly about what is quote unquote infrastructure. It isn't just roads and bridges.

It was fantastic to hear child care talked about as infrastructure, as it very much should be - only in part because you need specialized spaces to care for children en masse. Nothing makes working parents free like someone else being able to care for their child. This is one of the best examples of what we mean by systems making us free. If you have to care for your child 24/7, you aren't free to do so many things. One of the many reasons why we haven't done much publicity for this book is that my two co-authors were too busy surviving lockdown with two children under 5 in the house.

I also love that housers are finally claiming the infrastructure mantel, and this is vital - especially because nothing drives other infrastructure development like housing development, and vice versa. Reliance systems, or infrastructure, are not just pipes and wires and roads and bridges, but larger systems that include health care, education, green space, and so much more.

So the Spatial Contract was written as part of a wave of recent books on infrastructure, and we are proud to be part of this group of writers looking both hopefully and critically at these systems. We wrote it at a moment when a trillion dollars for infrastructure seemed - pun firmly intended - a pipe dream. The fight at that moment wasn't over good infrastructure, but rather over one of the worst infrastructure projects in recent memory - Keystone pipeline.

Now Keystone is the type of infrastructure project that gives infrastructure a bad name - polluting, violent, colonial, exploitative. The freedoms it produced were for the few, not the many, and would have come at the expense of many other freedoms. But infrastructure isn't good or bad inherently.

As the geographer Deb Cowen writes, 'infrastructure is necessary, but the violence it enacts is not. She continues, Infrastructure enables all manner of things, and it can faster transformation as well as reproduction.'

In her essay, she quotes the renowned Ojibwe activist Winona LaDuke about her opposition to the pipeline. Referring to the other great infrastructure crisis of that moment - one that sadly still continues - she says that if Keystone had been designed to carry clean water to Flint, Michigan, she would have been in favor of it.

In the same essay, Cowen asks a profound question. "Could repairing infrastructure be a means of repairing political life more broadly?"

In many ways, the Spatial Contract as a book is our way to answer Cowen's question with a resounding YES.

It's also about trying to channel all the critical ways we have learned about how infrastructure can hurt and kill and ignore and bypass and divide, things that Cowen

has spent years chronicling as well as anyone, into an imagination of this repaired political life.

Cowen's question, and our answer, bring us back to that question about politics and purpose that I started with. If we accept the connection between reliance systems and agency, between infrastructures and freedom, the next step is to think again about the relationship between these freedoms and these systems and our politics.

As we state in the book, we need to face the facts about what we need political life to be about. We have to start seeing reliance systems or infrastructure as one of the fundamental purposes of politics in the first place.

As we say in the book, We may or may not want to talk to our neighbor or fellow citizens, ...but working together to build and maintain reliance systems is why we have to.

What this means practically is putting reliance systems at the center of our politics, making it the primary subject of what we debate and discuss. It can't just be an occasional side show that ends up being more about a certain senator from West Virginia or Arizona rather than what we should build or fixed where for whom with what technology and what type of investment.

This just has not been the case historically. The politics of making these systems that make us free has generally been ignored, or dismissed as somehow local politics - not something you win the presidency on, or get a PhD in political science about. Not only would the political scientist I mentioned earlier refuse the idea that politics has a purpose, if he was forced to choose the central pillars of politics I imagine it wouldn't be mundane stuff like housing and energy and transport. It would likely be power or sovereignty or statecraft or ideology something else seemingly grandiose, not the actual material and socio-technical systems that we rely upon.

And it's not just that political scientists think that these systems are secondary, but economists too - these mundane things of everyday life aren't considered central to the economy by economists anymore than they are considered central to politics by political scientists. They're just inputs, or things that get produced as part of a multiplier effect from innovation or production or investment or all the things economists are taught to care about instead of the systems which we rely on.

We have to change this mentality about reliance systems if we actually want more equitable and more sustainable systems. Our book is part of a series of books and ideas coming from what many call foundational economics, a way of approaching economics that says we have to stop treating the seemingly mundane details and systems of life as secondary, as opposed the grand politics we've been thinking about for millennia.

So yes, what I mean here is that housing, etc. has to get more political, not less.

Now before you ask yourself if I am insane, remember that a definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and thinking that you will get a different result, which I would argue is what we are currently doing. This is actually important and hard, and it sometimes seems counter intuitive.

After all, if the goal is better housing and transport, it is tempting to run from politics. I sympathize with all my fellow eggheads who sometimes wish we could just engineer things, but I think you know we can't. The answer isn't some sort of technocracy, or a separation of the political and the technical. That has never worked, and I think most of the folks listening in would accept just how political technical decisions actually are.

Rather, we need a different type of politics which puts some of these technical issues at the forefront - and creates a new generation of political actors who understand that freedom comes in part from the ability to do things and that making and maintaining these systems is the central purpose of their jobs. If these means more engineers and planners and housers running for office, then fabulous.

But why do we have to get more political. It's those pesky positive freedoms. Good, bad or ugly, making systems - providing that freedom to do something that comes from something being there and working - is always about a deal.

To make homes, someone, often many different someones across vast organizations of someones, has to agree to provide finance, materials, labor, land, expertise, energy, water, sewerage, etc.

There has to be sound policy and laws and regulations underlying every part of it, including but definitely not limited to land use policy. Much of it will be formally agreed upon - in laws and contracts and policies. But what is in those formal agreements often comes from informal standards and customs and practices and ways of doing things. There will also be many informal deals and decisions as things get built and implemented, as things come together on the ground.

The fact that systems require a set of formal and informal agreements to get build and maintained and transformed is why we talk about a new politics of housing etc. as a new social contract for reliance systems. Now the idea of the social contract has a long, varied and often problematic history, but like many other ideas in this book we have repurposed it for our own use.

At its core, the social contract is a set of formal and informal agreements that underlie our relationship to governance and politics. People will talk about the general social contract, but, it what will become a core theme for the rest of this talk, we are talking about a set of very specific social contracts that are different in different places for different systems.

The spatial contract is our way of talking about a new social contract of these reliance systems - we call it the spatial contract to remind ourselves that we're talking about different systems that are materially and geographically specific.

As I said, we can't just pursue some generic new social contract, but specific social contracts for different systems in different places. Just like you can't go into a building supply store and buy an electrical outlet and expect it to pipe water, you can't design a new social contract based on housing and expect it to work for transport systems.

This specificity - thinking about how systems are different - is one of many frameworks that we develop in the book to help us imagine these new social contracts that we need. I'll come back to this specificity in a moment.

But first I want to talk about another important approach, one which we discuss but which isn't the focus of the book. We could talk about this new politics of reliance systems through the lens of rights.

Now rights are super important for combating 'negative freedoms' - both having barriers put up between you and the freedoms you could enjoy from a system, or having freedoms taken away.

Rights are absolutely vital to the larger social contract, because nothing undermines a larger deal more than having working systems ripped away from folks, from having inadequate service when a system is able to provide better, or from forms of exploitation and oppression through system building, like Keystone was proposing and like I will discuss in more details in a few minutes.

But as much as rights are important - I am a former tenant organizer and a long-time advocate for housing rights, including rent regulation - we cannot achieve all of the positive freedoms we need on rights alone. It's hard to have a right to something that has to be produced and maintained.... for that there is always a deal, i.e. a contract.

The transit riders in this photo can have certain rights with regards to service, but rights aren't going to get Marin County's transportation system to make that dramatic shift to make mobility more accessible and sustainable, let alone build all the housing next to the new mobility platforms. A focus on rights and a new set of Social Contracts, or Spatial Contracts, must go hand in hand, but rights alone are not enough.

Housing as a human right, clean water as a human right, these are important ideals and something for us to aspire to, but it is a new set of social contracts for these systems that will actually make these rights real.

Now not incidentally, while we discuss the value and limits of rights in the book, we could have done better at articulating this dialectical and intertwined relationship better. I happily accept any critique along these lines, and would even more happily - and more in the spirit of the Spatial Contract - accept an author or co-author who wants to help fix this.

So what does a new deal look like? How do we envision these new social contracts of reliance systems, or new spatial contracts?

For much of the remainder of this talk, I am going to lay out some additional pillars around which we think folks can come together.

Another trigger warning, this is going to get sensitive, and this time not just for political scientists or economist or people allergic to philosophy. If you are a socialist, a libertarian, a localist or a regionalist, or generally an -ist of any kind - other than perhaps a humanist - I am going to challenge you. If we are going to build a new set of social contracts around these systems, we need to accept a few difficult truths about reliance systems.

The meta-truth about all the things I am going to say is that ideology of all kinds - political, intellectual, cultural - is at the heart of the problem. Any new set of social contracts needs to set aside ideology - and start with the systems themselves.

The first is an easy one. Maybe like me, you only know a little about transportation and even less about energy or water or health care, but you know a bit about food and a bit about housing. Now I think it should be clear from this photo that the great people of Merced recognize that housing and enchilada making are not mutually exclusive when it come to land use, and I hope their zoning code specifically allows enchilada-making in all zones. But this slide isn't about the absurdity of euclidean zoning, but it is used to illustrate an even more basic fact.

Food is not housing. Food you need to replenish every day or you will be very unhappy very quickly. Housing you are generally just trying to maintain and hold onto, and can last for centuries. One is made of edible organic compounds that rot. The other is made of a mix of more durable organic and non-organic materials which you generally can't eat. If you are hungry you can't eat your house, and if you are homeless you can't live in even the largest of super burritos, and I live in Oakland which has the largest burritos in the world and I don't want to hear any debate of this fact. If someone is hungry, you can share your food but then you will have less food.

If someone is homeless, you may actually be able to share your home without any real impact on you at all. Enchiladas Mole is one of the worlds most complex food and has upwards of 50 ingredients, all of which are also food, so if you are missing an ingredient you may not have the best mole but you can still eat it. Even the simplest of houses has more than 50 ingredients and none of them are houses themselves or could be consumed as a house on their own, and if you are missing wood or rebar or electrical wire or plumbing good luck to you.

I could go on and on, but I hope you get my point.

The reason I say all this is not to show off my knowledge of food or housing, but because the way we have done politics largely ignores these differences. For the most part, we design our politics and political systems first, and then apply it to housing.

But this makes little sense. Not only are food and housing so materially different, the systems we have to produce them couldn't be more different. The role that different types of organization can play effectively is different. If you had to force me to choose a political allegiance under the current terms of politics, I'd tell you I was a capitalist when it came to enchiladas, and a socialist when it comes to housing. But how can that be? Under our current understanding of politics, you have to be one or the other. But these systems are so different! Why should the government or the private sector role in one system be the same as in another?

A core pillar of our book is the argument that all reliance systems are specific - **geographically, historically, materially**. Not only is housing in Merced not food in Merced, but Housing in Merced is not housing in Oakland. Housing yesterday is not housing tomorrow. And it isn't just that housing is not food, but trains are not cars and they can't be substituted for one another in most systems. This specificity of systems has to be a core starting point of new social contracts.

So this core truth - the specificity of systems - leads to another important pillar.

We have to talk about spatial contracts plural.

This is not a universalist book, and there isn't a one-sized fits all approach. Our book is a framework from which folks working on specific systems in specific places at specific times can better learn to pull apart and analyze those systems - and unite solely around the recognition that we need to work together to build and repair them. A new spatial contract for housing in Merced is going to be different than a new spatial contract for mobility or energy in the same location.

So in what I imagine is a fairly planner-centric crowd, I hope that one was easy. I hope that folks can appreciate the specificity of systems, and how ideology tries to create a politics and apply it to systems, as opposed to starting with the system. Now let's get to another truth, this one harder for some folks to accept.

In philosopher talk, reliance systems are collectively produced. In regular talk, you make almost nothing that you rely on. Other people and other organizations make almost everything. This is just a fact.

No matter how independent you are, no matter how rich or smart or libertarian, you have produced almost none of the systems you rely upon for most freedoms by yourself. This isn't meant as a polemical statement, even though it will certainly be taken as such by some. Again, it is just an - admittedly very political - fact. Even if you built your own home, chances are you didn't mill the timber and make pipes out of your backyard forge. Even if you have solar panels and wind energy and live off the grid, chances are you didn't make those panels yourself - let alone do the centuries of research and experimentation to finally learn how to convert sunshine into electricity. Even if you have built your own electric car company that also makes batteries and has an offshoot that makes tunnel boring tech and space tech and all the rest, you are still reliant on the work of many, many others.

But before my socialist friends get too excited, you soon may be as mad as my libertarian friends.

By collective we mean any group of humans more than just you - family, clan, tribe, state, private company, church, non-profit, etc. - not just the socialist notion of collective.

Again, we're just talking facts. In almost every place on earth, a transit system like this bus depends on dozens if not hundreds of different organizations of different sizes, scales and sectors coming together to provide the basic freedom of getting from point A to point B.

In most places, you will have a mix of sectors - private sector players tend to make the buses and the parts for the buses, public sector actors tend to fund and subsidize the sectors and own the roads, we fight over who operates the buses, and many non-profit actors weigh in on the policy, plans, public education etc. that underlies the system in the first place. Even under full communism you still had very different organizations coming together to create the system, even if they were all nominally controlled by a single-party state.

Our systems are collectively produced by a diverse ecosystems of different types of organizations responsible for very different parts of the system.

These debates about collective provisioning - whether it is inherently good or bad, or what a 'good' collective is imagined to be, are what we would call ideologies of sector - the libertarian ideal of the individual which doesn't actually describe much of anything in the world, or the way in which my socialist friends can attach themselves to certain types of idealized collectives - some to the big state, some to the small collective - as opposed to the very messy world of actual systems and supply chains.

We have a tendency to divide ourselves politically along public or private sector lines, rather than look at each system and understand how these interact.

Here in California, public agencies generally own the transport infrastructure like the Bay Bridge, while private firms bid to build it. Minor repairs are often done by public agencies, but larger repairs or overhauls are often bid out to specialist firms. Whether or not this is working should be determined by whether or not it is working, not your innate belief that a certain sector is good and other is bad. So long as we fetishize certain sectors, it prevents us from seeing the strengths and weaknesses of each sector and each organization in that sector the specific roles they can and cannot play effectively.

Who owns a system is often not the same as who builds it, and that is a useful distinction lost in the ideology of sector.

The previous two truths - first that systems are different, and second that they are collectively produced, and that neither conform to your ideology, is essential to a new set of spatial contracts. We have to develop new ways of analyzing and seeing these systems that goes beyond ideology.

We spend a lot of time in Chapter 2 building an analytical framework we call seeing like a system - how to analyze your system from the ground up. We repurpose ideas from different corners of economics - neoclassical economics, public goods theory and the brilliant Elinor Ostrom, systems theory, consumption theory, heterodox economics, you name it - all as a means of helping folks understand the specificity of your system or systems, and how specifically they are collectively produced.

Sadly, the scourge of ideology goes beyond traditional left/right understandings of politics. Much of the Road to Resegregation is about how a region that largely seems to agree on what we think of as political ideology - as represented by left and right - somehow failed to build and rebuild in ways that would produce enough housing and transport for everyone.

This is in part because ideology goes so much farther than how we feel about the term collective. San Francisco is the epitome of this - people love to point out the hypocrisy of blue states, but we can do the same for red states, not just because

people are hypocrites everywhere, but because these red/blue divides don't actually describe all the ideologies present in our current messed up politics of reliance systems.

So let's look at the various additional ideologies divides that keep us fragmented and make it harder to build healthier spatial contracts for different systems in different places.

The first are what we call ideologies of scale - the idea that a certain scale of governance is automatically the best. Local control! No, regionalism! We need federal action now! The global is good! The global is bad! Just like with sectors, this is a terrible place to start. I hope I already sound like a broken record - we have to start with the system.

Now I imagine for this crew I don't have to argue that local control of the Bay Bridge would be a very bad thing. You'd have tolls each way at different prices and only two cities would get money - and only two cities would have to pay for this. If the Bay Bridge was localized, it would never have been built. But this doesn't mean that we need to automatically regionalize everything. Yes, our transport system in the Bay Area is woefully fragmented, inadequate and unprepared for the future. And yes, some things that are currently too local - our 27 or 28 regional transit agencies - need some sort of change. But the smart approach isn't just to wave the ideological flag of regionalism, which hasn't worked in a century, despite the name of this institute.

Instead, we need to take the approach of Seamless Bay Area, one of my favorite reliance systems organizations in California. Seamless doesn't start with a scalar ideology, but rather with a focus on the actual freedom transport systems are meant to make - the freedom to move around the Bay Area regardless of income or car ownership. They approach the problem practically based on the actual transport system they have inherited, based on the specificity of what we have. Yes, better regionalism is part of the solution, but it isn't the starting point. It is just a means to an end. I urge folks to look at Seamless's principles, watch Ian's amazing videos on what it is like to transfer between systems - this is what it means to really see like a system. When regionalism is part of the answer, it has to be because it is part of the answer for that specific system.

And when you look deeply, you will realize that our mobility problems need governance at all scale - it's about getting the system right, not some magical scale of governance that will make it all work somehow.

Scale is just not how anything actually works.

I wish this was the end of the ideologies, but it is not. In Chapter 3, we talk about the various ideologies and mythologies based on the type of place you live, and how this impacts how you imagine you access reliance systems.

We talk about this as 'seeing like a settlement'. Human settlements are where all these systems come together. Urban, suburban and rural residents are all capable of false imaginaries of reliance systems. Urban and suburban folks will often take these systems for granted, talking about them as services which are somehow meant to just appear. Rural folks will somehow imagine that they are independent. But just because you poop into a septic tank doesn't mean that you don't depend on others to build and service that tank.

Again, your specific geography means a lot to how your system does and does not work, but you can't just start with some sort of basic assumption - either of the type of system you have, or should have, or its supposed independence.

The same goes with one of the most difficult of lines - whether a system is legal or illegal, formal or informal. Again, these things matter, and sometimes systems are made illegal for very good reasons.

But as we have learned both in the global south and in the global north, making assumptions about formality or legality and whether the system is actually working is problematic. Not only can informal and illegal systems be providing important freedoms not available elsewhere, many systems are in fact a hybrid. Many informal and illegal systems are used by the rich as much as by the poor.

Start again with the system, examine its parts and participants, and go from there.

Now I could talk endlessly about ideology and it's role in dividing us and preventing us from understanding how anything does or does not work.

But the truest divide, the biggest barrier to a new set of healthier spatial contracts as we would call them, is exploitation and oppression.

While this book attempts to be positive and hopeful, and to build on the energy of so many great thinkers and makers over generations, we do not paste over the gross exploitation that happens when people rely on systems for basic freedoms. Where we differ from most books is that we specifically examine how our reliance on these systems results in these systems being used to oppress. We tend to imagine exploitation in the workplace, or oppression solely through the lens of race or class. All of these are very true and very real, but more and more I would argue exploitation is something that happens through these systems - through housing that is too expensive or too tenuous or too hard to get, through energy and transportation

systems that provide bad air quality to some communities more than the actual energy or transport itself. These systems of oppression work along class and race and often gender or sexuality lines, but they work through systems, and this is what this book attempts to understand and illuminate.

We do a lot of repurposing and reusing of ideas in this book, and the one I am proudest of is our revision of Iris Marion Young's powerful 5 faces of Oppression. Rather than a class and labor analysis, we repurpose her focus on different ways groups can be oppressed - exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and straight up violence. It is absolutely vital to any hopes of a new social contract for reliance systems that we learn to better see the specifics of how oppression works through systems, and not just through labor or social group membership.

This is a subject that deserves a lecture of its own, and I will be putting out more about this and many other aspects of this book in coming weeks and months. Some of you will surely wish that I had talked about this part of the book and only this part, but I insist that the larger perspective is needed. But for those of you who would somehow want to ignore then negative and focus on just building shit, I'm sorry, this will never work. Remember, systems are historically specific, not just materially specific, and this history and this present moment is often quite ugly.

So that is the Spatial Contract in a nutshell.

We need to build a new social contract of the core systems which make us free, and we need to do it by placing these systems at the center of our politics, appreciating that these systems are collectively produced, and build our understanding of these systems from the system upwards, avoiding the temptation of ideology of all kinds. At the end of the book you will find two examples where we use the framework to think through important contemporary conversations.

The first is Universal Basic Income. Now I am a huge fan of UBI, but a spatial contract approach appreciates that there is a complementary approach to UBI - Universal Basic Services, or UBS, where what is provided is the service, not the cash. A spatial contract approach to this conversation shares the universal goal of both, and makes determinations of what to do and what to provide based on the specific systems in specific places. For transportation or green space, cash is only so useful. It likely makes sense to provide the service. But for housing or public art, cash may make more sense. But this is also context dependent. In the US, with a robust food distribution system and widespread electronic payment systems, UBI can work great for food insecurity. But not in India or many other places where you have to provide the actual food. Because not only can you not live in an enchilada, you can't eat cash, whether the paper kind or the electronic version.

The second is the green new deal, which similarly I find inspiring.

The spatial contract approach to the green new deal insists that we not forget what this deal is about - retrofitting systems. Sure, jobs matter, employment matters, but this can't just be a social or political program as traditionally conceived. It has to be technically smart and systems-focused. A spatial contract approach understands that a green new deal for housing is not the same as one for energy, but both matter.

This book is written in many ways for Green New Deal folks, and I hope it is useful. It is the closest we are right now to real conversations about a new social contract for systems we rely on.

Finally, I want to come back to something we actually discuss very early on in the book.

How do we actually evaluate whether any given social contract is good or just or healthy, which is the terminology we use?

We suggest 6 principles as a place to begin, principles which ask questions which I think we all should ask about our systems, or about any proposal out there to change an existing system. After all, if we are going to be historically rooted, we are almost always intervening in existing systems, not building things from scratch on a tabula rasa.

First, does the proposal retain the core purpose of the system? A bike share system should be about mobility, a housing system about housing. If it produces jobs or wealth or other useful things that is fabulous, but if it is being proposed for something that isn't its core purpose, it is probably a bad sign. Housing designed as a place to store the capital of the wealthy is a good example of something that fails this test. Two, does it strengthen or weaken the system. Three, does it improve access and inclusion, Four, does it reduce exploitation and oppression. Note that these are separate principles, in large part because Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor reminded us in her amazing book *Race for Profit* that predatory inclusion is a real thing in housing (and many other systems). These have to be separate questions, because sadly they are too often separate answers. Five, does the proposal respect planetary boundaries, and you can expand this to smaller scale environments as well. And finally, is the deal transparent. At the end of the day, if freedom is connected to a deal, everyone involved has to be able to see and understand the deal.

Thank you.