

Affordability, Dignity, and Democratic Control:

Towards Transformative Municipal Governance In New York City

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Affordability, Dignity, and Democratic Control: Towards Transformative Municipal Governance In New York City

This working paper series grows out of an extraordinary political opening in New York City: the election of Mayor Zohran Mamdani on a mandate to treat housing, transit, care, and education as social goods. The papers collected here offer “Real Utopian” designs for institutions and policies that are both transformative and feasible, with an eye toward durability, scale, and egalitarianism.

These papers are written to be used by transition teams, agency staff, movement partners, advocates, and elected officials who are now being asked to translate a governing mandate into practices, legal authority, policy, budgets, and forms of accountable implementation. They are working papers in every sense of the word: practical, opinionated, designed to support real decisions in real time, and open to revision.

What’s in the series

This series is anchored in housing proposals. *Building Blocks of a Progressive Building Agenda* shows how the city can act as a public developer and steward of social housing. *The Mayor’s Office to Protect Tenants* working paper turns tenant enforcement, anti-speculation strategy, and distressed-asset transfer into a coordinated mayoral function. *A Rent Freeze in New York City* makes the case for immediate relief and power-building for nearly a million rent-stabilized households, and for expanding rent regulation and rehabilitating vacant units.

Around this housing core, the mass governance framework and implementation papers sketch an overall architecture for mass participation: empowered assemblies, mass volunteerism, and “campaigning from government” anchored in real decision rights. *Towards Mass Governance* develops the framework, while *Implementing Mass Governance* goes into detail about what mass governance would look like in various domains. At the same time, *Towards a PB+* shows how participatory budgeting can be redesigned as a lever on the full city budget rather than a small-projects charity exercise. *Mass Worker Education* completes the picture by treating political education and worker leadership development as an ongoing public function rather than episodic campaign work.

Finally, we also release a revenue memo on taxing private higher education, a longstanding demand of communities in New York City, which identifies how to tap elite institutional wealth to fund public priorities. *The State of Affairs of Accessible Early*

Childhood Education and Care in NYC lays out a path toward genuinely universal childcare as core social infrastructure. At the same time, the proposal for a shared services cooperative (SSC) for childcare workers would preserve the independence of these providers while levelling up their capacities, serving as a key pillar for building a more inclusive and responsive childcare system across the city.

Underwriting all our research and analysis are a series of broader questions about the limits of transformation after decades of privatization, growing elite power, sharpening inequalities, and erosion of trust in the public sector. Discussion on these questions occupied much of our collective time, but we opted to not foreground them in the working papers. Instead, the papers take up Paulo Freire's question in *Pedagogy of Hope*: "What can we do now in order to be able to do tomorrow what we are unable to do today?"

What's Next

Each working paper will go through a community review process, which will result in a shorter, highly graphic companion brief for rapid circulation in the Spring of 2026. While longer versions archived here provide the full rationale and background research, the shorter briefs will emphasize main ideas in a digestible format. We will also collect additional briefs from community partners to round out our proposals.

A Disclaimer

These Urban Democracy Lab Working Papers are circulated for discussion and comment. They are working papers – they reflect ongoing research and analysis at a moment in time and may be revised. Individual authors are named on each working paper, with a lead contact author. You may also direct feedback on the overall series to: gb97@nyu.edu

These papers emerge from discussions with community partners and incorporate much of that feedback but have not yet gone through a process of community review as is our practice. We felt it was important to document our thinking and analysis at the start of the Mamdani administration.

Acknowledgements

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