

The Second Teacher: What a Tenth-Century Philosopher from Kazakhstan Knew About Cities That We Keep Forgetting

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March 2026

Most modern cities measure a great deal and know very little. They track air quality, traffic flow, housing starts, economic output, and citizen satisfaction. They commission studies, publish strategies, and hold consultations. What they struggle to say, with any conviction, is what all of this is in service of. Growth is the usual answer, offered with enough confidence to forestall the next question. Growth toward what, and for whom, is the question that tends to go unanswered.

This is not a new problem. It is, in fact, a very old one, old enough that the most rigorous attempt to solve it was made more than a thousand years ago, by a philosopher born on the banks of the Syr Darya river in what is now southern Kazakhstan.

His name was Abu Nasr al-Farabi. The scholars who came after him called him the Second Teacher, second after Aristotle. It was not a title given lightly.

The City He Knew

To understand why Al-Farabi's thinking about cities still matters, it helps to understand the city in which he did much of his thinking.

Baghdad in the ninth and tenth centuries was home to approximately a million people. It was administered in multiple languages, organized around sophisticated legal and commercial institutions, and positioned at the intersection of trade routes connecting China, India, Persia, and the Mediterranean world. Its libraries held more books than any institution in Europe would accumulate for centuries. Its scholars corresponded across continents. Its markets were supplied by a logistics network of continental scale.

Al-Farabi was not theorizing cities from the outside, or imagining them from a provincial retreat. He was living and working in one of the most organizationally complex urban environments in human history. He also spent time in Aleppo and Damascus, both significant cities in their own right, and he moved through the intellectual circuits that connected the major urban centers of the Islamic world. When he wrote about what cities are for and how they fail, he was writing from the inside of a problem he knew firsthand.

This context matters for a specific reason. The frameworks that dominate contemporary urban theory, the ideas taught in planning schools, debated in academic journals, and applied in city governments around the world, draw almost entirely on European and North American urban experience. The industrial city, the American metropolis, the postwar suburb, the creative-class city of the knowledge economy. These are the cities from which most current thinking about urbanism derives its assumptions and its vocabulary.

Al-Farabi was working in a different urban world, one that was in many respects more complex, and his framework reflects that complexity. That framework has been engaged seriously within Islamic philosophy, Iranian architectural theory, and Central Asian political thought for centuries.

What it has not done is enter the mainstream of the urban theory conversation that shapes how cities in much of the world are planned and governed. That absence has a real cost.

The Question He Started With

Al-Farabi began his civic thinking with a question that contemporary urban theory tends to approach carefully and put down quickly: **what is a city actually for?**

Not how does it grow? Not how does it compete for investment or talent? Not how does it manage its infrastructure or optimize its service delivery? What is it *for*? What is the shared purpose that justifies the whole enterprise of people living together at scale, submitting to laws, building institutions, and constructing things that outlast any individual life.

Al-Farabi's answer was direct. A city exists to cultivate human flourishing - the development of people's capacities for understanding and for living well together. Wealth, security, pleasure, and prestige all matter. But these are not the point. The point is what kind of people the city helps its inhabitants become, and whether it gives them the conditions to exercise their best capacities. A city that produces wealthy, comfortable, safe people who cannot reason clearly, cannot hold their institutions to account, and cannot distinguish genuine civic purpose from its imitation has, in Al-Farabi's framework, failed at its primary task regardless of its output statistics.

This sounds idealistic. It is worth noting that it is also the most practical possible starting point for governance. Without a stated civic end, a city cannot choose between competing priorities in any principled way. Every budget decision, every planning trade-off, every policy choice requires a criterion. Growth functions as a default criterion because it is measurable and politically uncontroversial, but it is a proxy, and a proxy with a strong tendency to become the end itself, crowding out the purposes it was supposed to serve.

Serious contemporary thinkers have circled back to this problem. The economist Amartya Sen spent decades arguing that development should be measured by what people can actually do and be (what he called capabilities) not by income or output alone. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum built a framework of civic obligations around a list of fundamental human capacities that cities and states owe their citizens the conditions to develop. These are sophisticated and influential contributions to a debate that is still unresolved. What is striking is that Al-Farabi was asking the same question more than a millennium earlier, from within cities that were already at a level of complexity these twentieth-century thinkers were trying to address. The question did not originate in Western political philosophy. It was already being worked on elsewhere in a different millennium.

The Architecture of the Virtuous City

Having named the end, Al-Farabi built a civic architecture for pursuing it. Not a physical plan, but rather a framework for how a city's institutions, laws, culture, and leadership should be organized if the cultivation of human flourishing is genuinely the goal. Five elements of that architecture are worth examining in some detail, because each addresses a problem that contemporary urbanism has not fully resolved.

Knowledge as infrastructure. A city that wants to cultivate good judgment in its citizens has to treat the capacity for judgment as a public good, not a private attainment. This means schools that teach people to reason, not just to qualify. It means institutions that make evidence and measurement publicly legible rather than technically inaccessible. It means that the experts who advise on complex decisions involving health, environment, finance, and land use are genuinely accountable for the quality of their reasoning, not just for the credentials that authorize them to speak. Al-Farabi called this priority logic-first. In contemporary terms it is argument literacy, and it is a prerequisite for a population that can actually hold its institutions to account rather than simply defer to or distrust them.

Translation layers. Most citizens will not read technical documents, follow policy debates, or work through the reasoning behind complex governance decisions. This is not failure but a fact about how human communities have always worked. A city that treats it as a problem to be solved through better communications is confusing the symptom with the condition. Al-Farabi's solution was explicit: the city needs institutions: stories, public rituals, ceremonies, festivals, cultural forms, and designed public spaces, that carry the same values as its formal governance but in forms that ordinary people can absorb and live by. These are not entertainment budgets or cultural amenities. They are civic infrastructure. The test he proposed for them was strict: do they point toward the same goods the city's formal institutions are trying to produce, or have they drifted into spectacle, nostalgia, or the celebration of lesser goods? When culture and governance diverge, the city has a coherence problem that no communications strategy will fix.

Law as durable wisdom. Good leadership is rare, and no individual leader lives forever. Al-Farabi's answer to the problem of institutional continuity was to bind civic wisdom to law, not as a rigid and unchanging code, but as a living framework of principles that judges and administrators interpret and adapt over time, always asking whether the adaptation serves the original purpose or merely follows convenience. The design principle is that good governance should not depend on exceptional individuals. It should be embedded in institutions capable of outlasting them, resisting the pressure to drift when leadership changes, and remaining legible to the citizens it serves.

The leadership pattern. Al-Farabi was under no illusion about the rarity of leaders who genuinely combine knowledge of civic ends with the practical capacity to govern and the ability to communicate honestly across a diverse population. He designed for the realistic case: a council that distributes those capacities across qualified people, provided the whole keeps genuine civic purpose in view. His criterion for selection was demonstrated competence and integrity, not lineage, wealth, or the ability to attract attention. Legitimacy, in his framework, is measured by contribution to the city's stated purpose, not by electoral performance, not by the ability to project authority, and not by the accumulation of symbolic capital.

The failure typology. This element of Al-Farabi's framework is the most immediately applicable to contemporary governance, and it deserves its own examination.

Three Ways Cities Fail

Al-Farabi identified three distinct types of civic failure. The distinctions are not subtle philosophical refinements. They are practical diagnostic categories, and the differences between them determine what kind of intervention will actually work.

The first failure type is **ignorance**. A city organized around ignorance has mistaken a lower good for the higher one. Its institutions, its culture, and its collective ambitions are oriented around survival, wealth accumulation, pleasure, honor, or dominance, and it genuinely believes this orientation is correct. The problem is not dishonesty or bad faith. It is an inaccurate picture of what human flourishing actually requires. In al-Farabi's reading, leaders and citizens alike are pursuing something real. They have simply misidentified what matters most. The remedy is education and reorientation, which is patient, generational, and difficult, because it requires changing not just policy but the underlying perspective of what a city is for.

The second is **error**. A city in error has the right end in view but is pursuing it through false means or through images that have become distorted. It knows what it is trying to achieve. It has wrong beliefs about how to get there, or its institutions have drifted away from the purpose they were designed to serve while retaining the language of that purpose. The remedy here is clarification and institutional redesign, identifying where means have diverged from ends, and correcting the structures that have lost their orientation without necessarily replacing the people who run them.

The third is **corruption**. A city in corruption knows the good and is choosing against it. The leadership understands what the city should be doing and has decided not to do it because the cost to their own interests is too high. This is not an educational problem. It is not a design problem. It is an accountability problem, and the only effective remedy is accountability, leading to the removal of entrenched interests and the restoration of real consequences for the failure to serve civic purpose.

The contemporary relevance of this typology is not hard to see. The dominant tendency in urban governance is to treat all three failure types as if they were variations of the same problem, requiring variations of the same remedy. Poor civic outcomes are most commonly attributed to insufficient data, inadequate resources, poor communications, or weak management. The standard responses are more measurement, more funding, better messaging, and organizational restructuring. These interventions are occasionally effective. They are also regularly applied to problems they cannot address, producing reform efforts that look serious, generate activity, and leave the underlying failure intact.

A city where civic purpose has been corrupted does not need better communications. It needs political accountability, and applying a communications strategy to a corruption problem is a way of appearing to respond while protecting the conditions that produced the failure. A city where institutions have genuinely drifted through error does not need a political purge, which will replace the people without correcting the design. A city in genuine ignorance, organized around the wrong ends, needs neither accountability nor redesign in the first instance. The city needs the slow, unglamorous work of civic education and reorientation.

Diagnosing the type before choosing the tool is not a complicated principle. It is, however, a discipline that urban governance rarely applies. Al-Farabi's failure typology is useful precisely because it forces that discipline.

The Tradition Behind the Thinker

Al-Farabi does not stand alone. He is the most systematically civic figure in a continuous intellectual tradition that emerged from Central Asia and Iran between roughly the ninth and fourteenth centuries, a tradition that was producing rigorous urban thought at a time when the cities it was thinking about were among the most complex on earth.

Ibn Sina, born near Bukhara a generation after Al-Farabi, extended the epistemological framework into medicine, philosophy, and natural science in ways that shaped European thought for centuries through Latin translations that reached the medieval universities. Ibn Rushd, working in the twelfth century, produced commentaries on Aristotle that were more widely read in medieval Europe than Aristotle's own texts, commentaries built on foundations Al-Farabi had laid. Ibn Khaldun, writing in the fourteenth century and drawing on the same intellectual tradition, produced in his **Muqaddimah** what is arguably the first systematic theory of how cities and civilizations rise and decline. This is an account of the relationship between urban density, social cohesion, institutional capacity, and civic decay that reads, in places, like a preview of ideas that sociology and urban studies would not fully develop for another five centuries.

This is a tradition, not a collection of isolated geniuses. It was doing what urban theory is supposed to do: generating systematic frameworks for understanding what cities are, how they work, and what they are for, from within a real and sophisticated urban world. The cities it was thinking about - Baghdad, Nishapur, Samarkand, Bukhara, Merv, Isfahan - were not peripheral to the history of urbanism. In their time, they were at its center.

That tradition has never lacked scholars. Islamic philosophers, Iranian architectural theorists, and Central Asian political thinkers have engaged it continuously. Recent work has applied Al-Farabi's civic framework to questions of smart city governance, urban pluralism, and welfare state design in contexts from Malaysia to Kazakhstan. What the tradition has not done is enter the mainstream conversation of Western urban theory, the debate that determines how cities in much of the world are planned, funded, governed, and understood.

That conversation has, in recent years, begun to examine its own limits. Scholars like Jennifer Robinson and Ananya Roy have made the case that urban theory has been built from a narrow base of European and North American experience and has treated that base as universal, systematically excluding the urban experience of the Global South. It is a valid and important critique, and it has begun to change the conversation. What it has not yet reached is the question of theoretical exclusion, that is, the possibility that serious urban thought was being produced outside Europe long before European urban theory existed, and that recovering it might change not just the range of cities the theory describes but the quality of the questions it asks.

What This Opens

The point of recovering Al-Farabi's civic framework is not to argue that a tenth-century Islamic philosopher has the answers to twenty-first century urban problems. He does not. His framework was built for a world without democratic legitimacy as a governing principle, without the tools of modern data and measurement, and without the structural critiques of capital and power that contemporary urban theory has rightly developed. Any serious engagement with his work has to reckon honestly with what does not travel.

What does travel is the quality of the questions. Can a city state **what it is for** in terms that the public can actually test? When governance fails, does the city distinguish between the failure of knowledge, the failure of design, and the failure of integrity, and does it choose its remedies accordingly? Does the city's cultural life point toward the same goods its formal institutions are trying to produce, or have the two come apart? Is the civic wisdom embedded in the city's best institutions durable enough to survive changes in leadership, or does it depend on exceptional individuals who will eventually be gone?

These questions did not originate in Chicago or Paris or London. They were being asked, with precision and intellectual seriousness, in Baghdad and Samarkand more than a thousand years ago.

The cities of Central Asia, Iran and Iraq are still here. Tehran, Baghdad, Samarkand, and Isfahan are living urban realities grappling with exactly the governance challenges that Al-Farabi's framework addresses. The intellectual heritage those cities carry is not a museum piece. It is a resource, one that belongs in the conversation about what cities are for, not as a regional curiosity or a point of cultural pride, but as a serious contribution to questions that every city, everywhere, still needs better tools to answer.

Urban theory has been asking those questions for a century. The tradition that asked them first has been waiting patiently for the conversation to expand. It has a lot to add.

Al-Farabi's principal work on the civic framework discussed in this essay is *Mabadi' ara' ahl al-madina al-fadila* (The Principles of the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City), available in English in the edition translated and edited by Richard Walzer (Clarendon Press, 1985). The intellectual and political context is developed in Muhsin Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy* (University of Chicago Press, 2001).