Niall Kishtainy
The Infinite City: Utopian Dreams on the Streets of London
This interview was recorded 4 March 2024. This transcript has been edited lightly for clarity.

Andrew - Be realistic: demand the impossible. A utopian dream for many centuries. Thinking about utopian cities and trying to deliver utopian ideas about cities has been a key part of our Festival of the Future City. Niall Kishtainy is the author of *A Little History of Economics*, which we've used extensively in our Festival of Economics work, and the book we're talking about today, *The Infinite City: Utopian Dreams on the Streets of London*. In addition to being a writer, Niall has worked in government, in journalism and in academia. Niall, thank you for joining us.

Niall - Andrew, great to be with you.

Andrew - Can we talk about the idea of utopia in cities to begin with? You mentioned in the book that utopia finds its place in the heart of the metropolis.

Niall - Sure. We can go back to the old Lewis Mumford, who is a great, great historian of the city and utopias in the middle 20th century, who said, 'The first cities that humans created were an example of a utopian leap, in a way. A shifting in consciousness that led to this leap in civilisation.' So, in a sense, he ties the utopian propensity to things that people were doing at the dawn of humanity, the dawn of civilisation anyway. But then, as utopian literature developed, particularly the Renaissance utopias of people like Thomas More, they're very much framed in terms of perfect cities, these walled, perfect societies. We'll talk about this problem of perfection perhaps later on. But this idea of utopian dreaming being indelibly linked to the creation of cities and how new social arrangements and new ways of people relating to each other runs from the creation of cities and the imagining of cities, so that this connection between utopian dreaming and cities goes back a long way in the tradition. That becomes a bit more complicated.

As you get into the late 18th century, 19th century, an anxiety emerges about the city. Of course, you start to get the development of industrial cities, big capitalist cities, London and Manchester, and the city starts to be seen as something darker and infernal. And then the relationship between utopia and the city becomes more complicated again. There's another theme that we might pick up later perhaps in the conversation: the rise in Romanticism and actually wanting to flee from the city and create a rural idyll away from the city. It's a complex, dynamic relationship, I think. But the idea of the city being really embedded in utopian dreaming, it's an idea that's been in the tradition for centuries.

Andrew - One of the issues there, and we'll talk about the Romantics wanting to get away from cities and this idea of perfection later. But there's this myth of a lost Arcadia, even the extent of the garden city movement idea of bringing the country to the city. Do you think there's a complication about this in terms of the way we think about rural and urban places as well as utopias?

Niall - Absolutely. That is when things get more complex, when a disillusion starts to set in about city life with the industrial revolution and the mushrooming of these larger and much more complex cities than had been theorised about by utopians in this pre-industrial period. What arises is a nostalgic yearning and a desire to escape the city. And there you see this, perhaps, reintroduction more powerfully of this idea of the golden age, which was an important source for utopias, but starts to take on a slightly different tonal hue in the 19th century, where people are using that as a way of thinking about escaping from these infernal cities, and then particularly you've got this move to American communitarian ventures that then start to really take off at that time. So, it becomes a much more complex picture.

Andrew - We might talk about the Romantics here because there's this connection with Bristol, with Wordsworth and Coleridge writing the *Lyrical Ballads* partly in the city and publishing it here. They had this idea for their own utopian community in America, the Pantisocracy, which would have been a fine place to live generally - unless you were a woman, because they would do a lot of the work. Romanticism was a reaction against the growing industrialisation and a wish to get away from that.

Niall - The Pantisocracy is a classic example of that in the 1790s. There are these different threads in utopia, there's a literary thread of storytelling, and then there's actually the more practical thread of actually of setting up communities. And here you've got those two things coming together with these poets dreaming of this new communal society that they wanted to create and then actually made... unsuccessfully. I think, originally, they wanted to go to America, and then said, 'OK, America's too tricky, let's do it in Wales.' And then they all fell out. And it's a debacle. But definitely part of that Romantic disillusion with the city and wanting to create a little agricultural, communitarian system, and so on, very much of an archetypal adventure at that time, and there are many more examples of it going into the 19th century actually.

Andrew - I think one of the great values of this book is the way that you show how relevant utopian ideas are to the city then, throughout time, but also to the city now, which we'll come on to. But before we do that, can we talk about how we think about utopia? You quote, and again there's a nice Bristol connection here, the academic writer Ruth Levitas, about how to think about utopia. She talks about utopia as method, utopian archaeology and utopian ontology. Just talk us through those.

Niall - I think it's a really useful framework. So often, again this is a thing we might pick up again, but often utopia is a quest for something that's perfect. And once it's done, it's finished and it's static and that's a straw man. Well, that's naive and impossible. There are all these, Ruth Levitas is one example, thinkers trying to figure out how you use utopia in a much more open-ended way. She talks about utopia as much more a process, as methods for bringing social yearnings into the present, into reality, thinking how we engage with them, thinking how we use utopia as this process. It's not a destination. It's a journey that we're on.

She's got various elements to make up her way of doing it. One is utopian archaeology. This is the idea that utopian ideas are often embedded in all sorts of political programmes, even ones that we would certainly present themselves as non-utopian and present themselves as pragmatic. You might think of liberalism or meritocracy, these kinds of things, free markets, for example, very mainstream so-called pragmatic ways of regulating society, but, actually underneath those, there's often an idealised vision. One part of this utopian process is to try and excavate those things, a kind of archaeology, and to bring them into proper public debate and say, 'OK, what is the vision behind this particular way of looking at society?' Because if we don't do that, they get imposed by default. Oh, this is just the pragmatic, there is no alternative type of argument. We just have to have austerity. We just have to have neo-liberalism. That's just an economic law of gravity, if you like.

It's a way of challenging that, and other threads would be what she calls utopian ontology. Thinking about what is the division of human flourishing that has to be part of utopian dreaming? What kinds of people do we want to be? How do we want to relate to each other, those kinds of things? Thinking about those in more conscious ways. So, seeing utopia as much more of an exploration of a process, not a blueprint that's going to be imposed and that nothing else has to happen.

Andrew - Whenever I've spoken to Ruth – we did a series of lectures for the 500th anniversary of Thomas More's 'Utopia', Ruth was one of the speakers in this – we talkabout this process, this journey. You still have the vision of human flourishing, and you still have lots of things you can build on. But it's the idea of the process you go through rather than the blueprint itself. I think it means you do achieve some things. You might not achieve the lot, but you do achieve some things through that.

Niall – Yes, I think that's been understood in the utopian tradition for a long time, even by people who are sometimes considered not to have understood that. So even William Morris, who is often seen as someone with this blueprint. There's a famous quote, I can't remember the exact phrasing, but he says, 'When you get to this utopia, you get there and you realise it's not quite what you imagined it to be, or things have changed and you have to cast off again and do it again.' It's a constant reimagining. I think that's the way to think of it.

Andrew - The other thing which comes across very strongly in the book, in terms of thinking about utopias, is about observing the city. You talk about, for example, Henry Mayhew taking a balloon ride over London. Dickens went out to observe the city. And that's something we've been stressing very much as well, that if you want to understand cities and particularly think about their future, is talk to people, wander around, understand where the city is, where it's come from, what are the problems that the city is facing and the challenges, and what are the hopes that people have?

Niall - Absolutely. That was certainly the way I wrote the book actually, doing a lot of walking around London. It was a combination of drawing on history and literature, but actually seeing how that plays out in the real lived environment of the city. I think that's really important. Sometimes utopia can feel very theoretical and abstract. But an important part of it is looking at the city. I don't really cover Marx too much in the book for complicated reasons. But you've got that very famous bit of Marxist literature, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* by Friedrich Engels, which was basically going around Manchester looking at a very grassroots level what are things like for people in the city and yes, as you say, people like Henry Mayhew, not a utopian, I present him as an everyman conscience of the city rather than someone with utopian plans. But going out into London and finding these new areas that had been hidden, places like Jacob's Island and some of the slums that were hidden from middle-class Londoners and how that created a desire to remake the city and reform and triggered all sorts of anxieties among reformers and wanting to do something about it. I think that's a really important part of the story.

Andrew - Before we come on to some of the specific people you talk about, this notion of social dreaming, of imagination and how critical that is to this. I see it now in some organisations, for example, in Bristol, those who are working in inner city areas on innovative housing projects. I see it in organisations in Birmingham, there's an organisation called Civic Square who have new ways of organising in places. But underpinning it is this idea of some kind of dreaming to make the place better for, and particularly with, people. And that's been an element of utopian thinking throughout, hasn't it?

Niall - Yes, absolutely. And I think a key element of it. So you can think about, yes, city design and the design of buildings and so on, and create beautiful plans etc. But I think a really key part of utopia is how do people relate to each other, so what is community, what is connection, what is belonging about? And that really has to be a part of it. It's not just creating a beautiful city plan. That is often a part of it, but it is about how does that reorganisation of space or whatever, how does that trigger new ways of relating, new ways of dealing with each other? I think that has to run through utopian projects.

Even if you think about the environment and climate change, for example, it's not just enough to think about technical solutions. We have to think about how does this problem come about as a result of perhaps a failure of relating, or failure of working together? So how do you reconstitute people's relationships and so on? That has to be really central to it, otherwise you get things like technological utopianism and valley utopianism, or find some great technological hack and then everything will be fine. That's not really utopianism in the way that I see it.

Andrew - Let's start with looking at some of the people, and you cover a vast range, some of whom I knew a lot about, some of whom were new to me, which is always the great value of a book like this. But let's start with perhaps the most obvious one, which is Thomas More and his 'Utopia'. What does Thomas More say about the city, for you?

Niall - It was a great way to start the story because he invented the word 'utopia'. It's a lovely narrative starting point, but also more than that, he was writing really in the context of London in 1515, so London really on the cusp of turning into this modern commercial city and on its trajectory to becoming a European heavyweight city and becoming the leading commercial city, turning into this big capitalist behemoth eventually. And he was seeing the tensions that were arising because of that.

So this fast commercialisation, the beginning of enclosures of land and so on. It's really casting a critical eye over that. I think that's really what, in terms of how it relates to London, that's the connection and

interestingly, the utopia that he wrote isn't set in London. It's on an island, probably somewhere in the new world. This was a period in utopian writing where it's very much about projecting society not into the future, but often geographically distanced into the new world. But the town that he talks about on this island has all these echoes of London, I think. So it's really a renovated, morally righteous London that he's envisioning there.

Andrew - You write in the book about how he created his own mini utopia at home, the way they lived and what they talked about.

Niall - That's right. Later he moved to Chelsea, had this lovely manor house with gardens running down to the river. More is a legendary character and one part of his legend was this idea, this domestic humanist idyll that he had by the river with Erasmus dropping by, a bit of philosophical discussion. And his children being taught Latin and having this humanist education, and him helping the poor in the lanes around. That's very much part of that legend of Thomas More.

Andrew - More wrote about utopia. The next group I want to talk about is Gerard Winstanley and the Diggers, who tried to deliver a utopian community. You talk about how this was a watershed in thinking about utopia.

Niall - Thomas More's 'Utopia' is very much a renaissance utopia. He certainly wasn't trying to gather a band of followers. He was very high up in the elite power structure, Catholic, and definitely not a revolutionary. But when Winstanley comes along, utopia has started to really connect a bit more. This happens much more in the 18th century, starting to connect to the idea of progress and actually humans being able to create better kinds of institutions. Winstanley actually gathered a band of followers and started to try and create his utopia. It was the watershed. It was a very different world, imaginative world to that of Thomas More. The idea that humans, through their own efforts, could renovate the world and create a better society, more righteous, if you like.

Andrew - And you write about what they talked about, the notion of working together and eating together. The earth as a common treasury and no dominion or lordship. These important foundations I think of thinking about this whole issue.

Niall - That's right. The phrase was, work together, eat together, the earth as a common treasury. So, yes, the idea of a new form of reciprocity. New forms of solidarity. This is another theme in London utopia, sometimes actually retreating slightly from the city to try and create something outside the infernal city. He went out to Surrey, to Cobham, and tried to create this little colony that was attempting to essentially sow vegetables on this hill and gather followers. He was originally a merchant in the city but suffered economic losses during the Civil War. He left the city and wrote a vitriolic text saying, 'I was cheated out of the city by all this thieving and this unjust economy.' And tried to create a new system outside London.

Andrew - The opposition that he found, and there was strong opposition to him, how symptomatic is that, do you think, of people who do try and introduce these new ways of working through time? You talk about the protest movements, the reclaim the street movements, later in the book, in more recent times, which have their own opposition as well. How difficult is it to try and deliver these things in the face of that opposition?

Niall - It is difficult. Clearly utopias are trying to often challenge power and challenge dominant forms of social organisation and how the economy functions. It's going to generate opposition. A lot of these movements that I talk about in the book did generate opposition in different ways. In Winstanley's case, that's actually getting beaten up by local gentry and farmers. But in other movements, in different ways, more like government repression and imprisonment. Other utopian movements are interesting. Robert Owen is quite an interesting one in the 19th century in that he's much more able to negotiate with power. In a sense, he manages to use power to his advantage. So, he gets quite a lot of, even members of the royal family, to support what he's trying to do in terms of building these little communities. Some have criticised

him for that, saying he compromised with power. So not all utopians are these pugnacious and oppositional figures. And then you've got the garden city utopias as well, again these feel very different. But often they do generate opposition. And you see that now in some of the modern contemporary what I would call utopian movements involving the environment and you can see what the response from the government has been.

Andrew - Before I come on to housing and garden cities, I just wanted to ask you about a couple of other figures that you talk about who were new to me, and both were related in time as well, Thomas Spence and Robert Wedderburn. Spence is the kind of person you'd have liked to have met, partly because he created this whole new language, or tried to create a new language, and rewrote *Robinson Crusoe*, for example, in this new language. But Wedderburn was also very interesting, he's almost like a forerunner of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Niall - Spence was this very truculent, fiery, utopian who gathered these utopian followers, created this utopian movement in the alleys of Holborn and Soho. This was in the 1790s, very much in the context of the French Revolution. And wanting to have a revolution in England. Robert Wedderburn was one of his followers but eventually created his own little utopian movement, using the model of a dissenting chapel. He had a hayloft in Soho that his followers would come to. It was this extraordinary utopian radical theatre as a preaching loft. He was propagating a form of Spence-ianism. This was to do with the local ownership of land, but also giving it a much more anti-slavery Atlanticist point of view, saying that the planters in the colonies and the factory owners in Britain are of the same ilk. They're both using Black people and working-class people as fodder for the global capitalism, this sort of idea. He was eventually imprisoned. An extraordinary character.

One thing that's interesting about him, he wasn't trying to take on the norm of respectability. He was very much rejecting that and saying that this isn't about the injustices about society, and the solution is not necessarily just the individual bettering himself, it is about a broader structural violence and injustice. So very much looking forward to the Black power movements of the 20th century, Black Lives Matter and those contemporary movements, but really quite a neglected figure, not that well known.

Andrew - You write about the golden thread that goes through a lot of this activity, and that is really summed up in what you write about going from the garden city movement through to the municipal utopianism of the 1930s, then beyond that to the Beveridge Report and to the Attlee government and the post-war housing building and the National Health Service and so on. I'd like to focus a little bit on housing because it seems to me that here were attempts made to, if we could crudely say, create a new heaven on earth or build a new Jerusalem. Housing was such a critically important issue for cities, particularly for working-class people living in slums. And as we come to the present day, the housing crisis we face now demands that new thinking as well.

But let's start with the garden city movement, the idea of the country in the city. We know about Ebenezer Howard. But you write about Henrietta Barnett, another woman utopian thinker. And we'll talk about Ada Salter as well in a moment. What did they do? What was their aim in terms of building utopian ideas into cities?

Niall - It was very much part of that, you mentioned Ebenezer Howard, very much part of that. I guess there was a group of movements that were going on towards the late 19th century, which was about how to renovate urban life in the wake of the Industrial Revolution basically. And one effort was to, in some sense, bring the country into the city to try and somehow mingle the two in a way that would create a new city that would be healthier and more morally uplifting and spiritually uplifting. Ebenezer Howard tried to do this famously at Letchworth.

Henrietta Barnett was working around the same time. Slightly different model, but in a way looking towards the same problem. She was the founder of Hampstead Garden Suburb, in north London. The idea of a garden suburb that would combine the best of the city and the country, wouldn't necessarily be a

completely self-contained city in the way that Ebenezer Howard tried to create at Letchworth, but it would create a new suburb on the edge of London that would be a contrast. Of course, at that time, there were lots of suburbs growing, but they're often these developer built, commercially built suburbs that were sprawling without much sense of shape. And they were monotonous. She was trying to do something that was very different, that was a green, holistically planned suburb that would bring in different social classes, that would have working-class people, middle-class people living together. And she extraordinarily managed to create this suburb close to Hampstead Heath.

Andrew - One of the things that you mentioned there was something I wanted to ask you about, this idea of utopian places bringing together different groups of people, different social classes of people. This is what Bevan wanted to do with council housing in that famous quote about the butcher lives next to the doctor and so on. I thought it was very significant in that thinking at that time as well as much later on, 40 or 50 years later on when Bevan was building the council estates post-Second World War.

Niall - Absolutely. I think that's a really key element of utopia, that goes back into history of classlessness, of doing away with inequality, and creating a different type of reciprocity and connection between people. That goes back a very long way. But in terms of some of the stories in the book and Robert Owen, initially his idea was to create colonies for the poor, but that actually eventually expanded into let's create something that brings together everybody and actually creates a new society. Some of the utopian theorists like Charles Fourier, phalansteries where these class divisions would be melted down, new kinds of groups arise and new kinds of solidarity. So that's a really key part. The council housing push is now forgotten about because, as I talk about in the book, we lost faith in that vision. And council housing then moved into this idea of residualisation, as they called it. Council houses were basically a kind of social ambulance type of thing. People who were right at the bottom of society were not able to participate in some way. So to the very lowest strata. But originally it was about bringing different classes together and creating a new society and new kinds of solidarities. That's a really important thread in the story.

Andrew - We did a big project on the council estate in 2019 for the centenary of the first estate in Bristol, and we commissioned a group of writers to write about growing up in council housing. And their experience was generally the one you've referred to there. I grew up in council housing and you were regarded as a second-class citizen. When they were built, they were homes fit for heroes was the slogan at the time. They were for middle-class people as well as working-class people. They were often built with communities in mind. The growth of the public library system, for example, in Bristol, often went alongside council estates. As council estates were built, you had public libraries built and community centres and so on. They didn't all work perfectly and there's some terrible examples of planning in Bristol, which we talked about then and we'll be doing more work on in the future. But the hope was there that this was good housing, secure tenancies, for communities to develop and for families to be built and for people to be able to work and have some security of tenure over their heads.

Niall - Exactly, and in that earlier period you mentioned that sense of pride. I look at this topic through the lens of Berthold Lubetkin, who was this very visionary architect in London and he built some very, very high quality estates. Hearing the people who moved into them talk about the sense of pride and how extraordinary it was to live in such accommodation. Lubetkin famously said, 'Nothing's too good for ordinary people or working people.' So, he really tried to try to do that and his sense of excitement and pride in now living somewhere like that. Through the '80s and the rundown of the estates, we forget if you're of a particular age, my sort of age, we forget what that would have been like.

Andrew - Lubetkin was an important figure in all of this, as you mentioned, and this period in the '20s, particularly the 1930s, when you had this growth of practical utopia, you had municipal utopia, you had the Finsbury Health Centre, the precursor to the NHS, and the remarkable Ada Salter and the work that she did in Bermondsey I thought offered very valuable lessons for today as well.

Niall - She's part of the same push for social housing. Very much part of this new front of radical local governments that emerged in London into the early 20th century. The thing that she's really famous for

that still exists in Bermondsey, the small garden city, just back from the river in this very gritty industrial suburb of Bermondsey. That's the non-retreating version of utopia. Not trying to retreat from the city and create a rural idyll somewhere but say, 'OK, let's see what we can do here among the factories and the cranes and the docks in Bermondsey and create this little, small garden city, and other developments as well.' But she was an absolutely extraordinary example of very much practical utopianism. Pushing stuff through committees against people opposing what she was trying to do, and pushing it through and getting her vision actually built on the ground, was an extraordinary achievement.

Andrew - I thought interesting also was the way that they integrated film into the work. There's a wonderful picture you have in the book of a street full of people watching this mobile cinema. And these were films about health issues, weren't they? And about things like that to make their communities operate better.

Niall - Exactly. It comes back to what I was saying earlier, it's not just about design, it's about how you create an ethos. If you want to use the word 'propaganda' or 'ideology', I don't mind, that's fine by me. But in a way, that's what they were trying to do, to create these facilities, but also to, in a way, create a new citizen of London using the ideological tools that they had. The film vans, literature they distributed in libraries, all sorts of things. And they did create this Bermondsey ethos. They called it the Bermondsey Revolution. It was an extraordinary moment in history.

Andrew - Where are we with utopia now, do you think? You talk about the growth of protest movements, reclaim the streets? We've had Lefebvre's right to the city. Lots of people have written about cities and utopian thinking. But where do you think we are now with utopia and cities?

Niall - I think a lot of these strands that we are talking about are still very much in play. What I was trying to do in the book was to say that there's this imaginative lineage out there that is available to us. A lot of the things that Barnett was talking about, Spence was talking about, many of the other movements in the book, I think still speak to the sort of things that we're worried about today. You just mentioned Lefebvre, so whether it's how we use space in the city, the pseudo privatisation of a lot of London and probably other cities, probably Bristol as well, and how that has impinged on the way that we use the city and how we relate to each other. That's something that's been thought about through the tradition and we're still concerned about today and worried about today.

The other big one that you mentioned earlier is housing. Of course, there's a huge amount of thinking going on there. In this tradition, housing is so much at the centre of what goes on in utopian thinking. Even if you go back all the way to Thomas More, one of the first things you hear about when you visit his island is what houses look like. They're exchanged by lots every ten years. They've got these communal gardens at the back. The doors don't have locks so everyone can come in and out and visit each other. It's really a powerful sense of how housing connects to the ethos that we live by, how we relate to each other. And housing is a really deep part of the social infrastructure. Again, I think that was lost with the turning away from social housing and council estates. All that stuff, that's very much alive in the debate and how urbanists are thinking about the city. Yes, I think utopia is very much here and alive and a tradition that offers us many tools and many points of inspiration.

Andrew - When you think about the things that affect cities now, housing is one, transport is another, inequality, over them all is climate change and the environment. You look at very contemporary movements like Extinction Rebellion as being part of this lineage, this tradition, in utopian thinking.

Niall - Yes, absolutely. It's taken on a new angle in the last 20 years, 30 years, because of climate change. But again, many of the strands go further back. I don't think we'll solve climate change unless we think about how we relate to each other more broadly and how society is set up. It's not just about these technical solutions. For example, how we think about consumption. Again, that's something that is very much part of the tradition. Thomas More had this vision of a society aesthetics, anti-luxury. In modern terms, he'd be an anti-consumerist. That idea, how do we cope with this consumerist society? How are we

going to solve climate change if we still pursue consumerism? Another strand of it is the garden cities idea of trying to create some sort of fusion between the urban and the rural and how we can renovate cities by bringing nature into it. That's a huge part of what's going on in the cities, with rewilding and greening projects and so on. Again, there are threads there that connect to earlier thinkers.

Andrew - I do think there are threads and there is hope. I see this in Bristol with the greening of the city, the rewilding projects, there are also tensions as there always are in these matters. It brings me to this more general issue about progress and the notion of progress you write about this in the book, the work of Isiah Berlin and Karl Popper and their criticisms of utopian ideas. Do you think we've lost, or can we regain if we have, this idea that we can make progress for a better city?

Niall - I think we have to. Yes, we need to, and I think utopian thinking can help us to do this, go beyond the optimism/pessimism dichotomy, when people say 'Are you an optimist or a pessimist?' A very passive way of thinking about society and the future, it's just something that happens to us, rather than thinking about what some people have called active hope. We create our social reality. If we can get beyond thinking about it as a final blueprint, but more as a process, then it's a really powerful way of moving beyond that and thinking about how we might improve cities and societies.

The other problem is we lost faith in these grand narratives, and utopia can feel like this grand narrative. As you mentioned, Popper and Berlin with all the horrors of the 20th century, we lost faith in that, and moving into a more postmodern society, so by the time we get to the '90s, if you think about political life in Britain in the '90s, all about pragmatism and so on, no sense of wanting to be pedalling these grand narratives. There are barriers to it. But we do need to embrace that and there are things we can do.

And it's really important not to make the perfect the enemy of the good, and this is one of the real sticking points that people have with utopian thinking, is this dominant perception that it's about perfection, it's about creating the end of history and the final blueprint. That's a huge mistake, we need to head that off. And if we do, there are many parts of the tradition and many tools that we can use to do that.

Andrew - I see that in ideas like the growing move to a four-day week, for example, which, when you think about it, is a no brainer. Productivity doesn't seem to suffer, and people seem a lot happier. You write about universal basic income – this is an older idea which has begun to take on a new relevance now. I think that there are certain projects which would be of huge benefit to cities and to living in cities and to life in cities and to people's wellbeing, which some have criticised as utopian in the past when 'utopian' is used in a negative way, but nonetheless are potentially huge steps forward.

Niall - I would absolutely agree with that. There's increasing evidence that those sorts of things would have a huge impact on people's lives and, if you want to see things in a very instrumental perspective of productivity, that actually might even enhance things in that area. Other things in the policy, things like 15-minute cities, which has created strange forms of opposition but again it's about trying to create this sense of the more liveable neighbourhoods as a way of creating connection and new forms of community. A huge part of utopian projects. There are these elements out there that connect to the story.

Andrew - You saw it during Covid, you write about this, and we all experienced it personally. The mutual aid that existed. Even a couple of years on from Covid, my neighbourhood WhatsApp group is still working together. I knew more about my neighbours through Covid and after Covid than in the 20 years I'd lived in the street. This idea that Covid was going to deliver something – we can't go back to what we were doing – has worked in certain ways. The government would like us all to be back in the office five days a week and I think that's a lost hope in many ways for certain areas of work, it can't be done for everyone of course, but there was that chance in a crisis which could have led to huge change and has perhaps led to something which is good, and that's part of the move towards a better place in the future.

Niall - I'd agree with that. In the book I talk about utopian windows, these moments of crisis where utopian yearnings emerge and take on a greater solidity. And Covid was obviously an element of that, the mutual

aid, people finding new forms of solidarity, the NHS clapping on Thursday nights, all this symbolism, and people talking about not wanting to go back to the old way and detecting new political possibilities. When you look back on it, it's a bit of a mixed picture I think, these utopian windows often close up again. And there are some residues of them still around, as you say, but you look around the political landscape and you think, 'Where did it go?'

Andrew - Coming back to what you say, perfection is the enemy of the good, is one thing, but also Ruth's idea of the steps towards utopia, the utopian thinking you go through, and indeed also I see it in how people are organising and new forms of places where people can discuss these things. You talk about crucibles of social imaginings, Toynbee Hall is one example of that in London, we nowadays call that social infrastructure but there's a golden thread going back a long time of those things. And the more we have the better, I think.

Niall - Absolutely. Couldn't agree more.

Andrew - Thank you very much for joining us today. *The Infinite City: Utopian Dreams on the Streets of London* is published by William Collins and is highly recommended. Thank you, Niall, for joining us today.