



FROM FRINGE TO FEDERATION:

*The Future of
Freedom Cities*

by Joe Carpita

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In March 2023, then presidential candidate Donald Trump announced a seemingly bold new platform as part of his third campaign -- building up to ten futuristic "Freedom Cities" on federal land, part of a plan to "create a new American future." For those who follow politics, this proposal seemed equal parts radical and ridiculous, especially with Trump's suggestion that these cities would be traversed via flying cars.

Beyond the hot air, these so-called Freedom Cities are the latest manifestation a larger, growing movement where wealthy libertarian-type individuals are attempting to annex land from nation-states to create new enclaves outside traditional democratic structures, promising deregulated innovation while bypassing local, regional, and national governance.

From Próspera in Honduras to Destiny on Nevis to the Presidio in San Francisco, these initiatives seek to replace civic participation with corporate governance, blending Balaji Srinivasan's "Network State" rhetoric with tales of untold riches via unregulated innovation, absent taxation.

While this might sound like the fringiest of weak signals, what we're witnessing is a dangerous convergence of Silicon Valley accelerationist ideology and political power that could fundamentally reshape how we govern ourselves. Freedom Cities aren't just experiments in creating new cities or playgrounds for the rich, they're redefining sovereignty itself, with potentially devastating consequences for democracy and social equity. To explore what Freedom Cities might mean for governance and cities, we must first ground it in its historical and philosophical precedents.



LOOKING BACK AT FREEDOM CITIES

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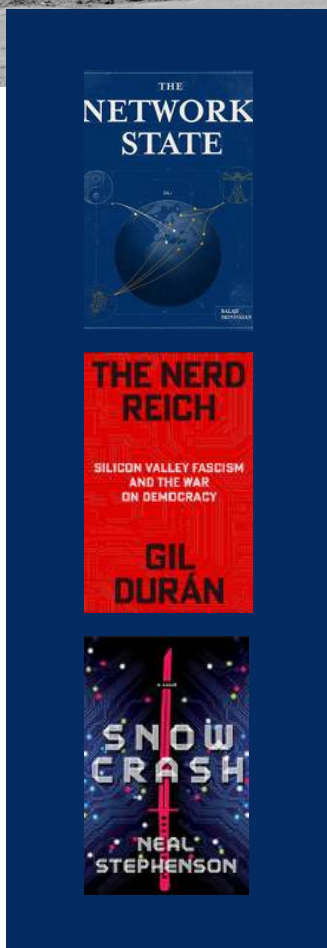


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On the substack “The Nerd Reich,” in which author Gil Duran extensively analyzes the intersection of tech wealth and executive power, Freedom Cities are described as a direct political implementation of the Network State, a concept created by Balaji Srinivasan to establish privately governed enclaves outside traditional democratic oversight, powered by web3 technologies such as cryptocurrencies, smart contracts, and blockchain governance. For the Sci-Fi fans, this architecture mirrors the fictional “Franchise Operated Quasi-National Entities aka FOQNE” from Neal Stephenson’s 1992 novel *Snow Crash*, where megacorporations rule fragmented territories rather than nation-states. While Stephenson presumably intended dystopian satire, modern proponents treat it as a pragmatic blueprint. Applying a macro-historical lens, Stephenson’s FOQNE and Freedom Cities function as digital-age re-brands of the company towns of the early American age of industrialization. Much like these industrial-era settlements where employers monopolized civic structures, housing, commerce, and labor to ensure loyalty, core to the idea of Freedom Cities is voluntary choice of corporate control over public space and civic life in exchange for a comfortable-yet-less-regulated life.

Stepping back even further, prior to the founding of America, this approach explicitly revives the charter city models of the Colonial Era, treating natural (and inevitably, human) resources as commodities to be carved up for profit. The Freedom City iteration of cities is essentially a modern age recreation of the historical city-state with a thin veneer of new technologies such as cryptocurrencies, biomedical engineering, or artificial intelligence as the mechanism of unlocking innovation and slashing bureaucracy. In reality, they're restoring a governance model where wealth in the hands of a few dictates the rules, bypassing democratic accountability to secure economic advantage and, ultimately, control.

The philosophical shift is equally telling, and 90's era Silicon Valley cyber-utopianism has hardened into pragmatic escapism. As Hari Kunzru observed writing for Harper's in an article ominously titled "Exit," techno-libertarians increasingly view democratic majorities as hostile to innovation, abandoning physical territory hunts (e.g., the Micronations of the mid-20th century) in favor of engineering structural loopholes via exorbitant executive & legislative campaign contributions. Governance has become a product to optimize, political participation a friction to bypass. The goal of Freedom Cities is, ultimately, to create insulated corridors for capital and self-styled cognitive elites, not build better or freer democracies.

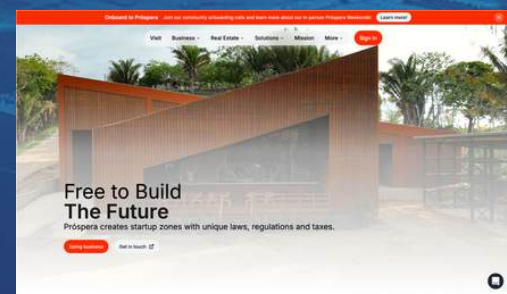
As always, the future is already here, it's just not evenly distributed. In the U.S., advocates such as the Charter Cities Institute are pushing to restructure federal land like the San Francisco Presidio into AI-focused economic innovation zones, bypassing state zoning and environmental reviews. Internationally, Próspera has successfully attracted venture capital (including from Balaji Srinivasan, Peter Thiel, and Marc Andreessen) by offering low taxes, crypto-friendly regulations, and experimental medical trials, despite the current Honduran government labeling its special economic status illegal. Meanwhile, projects such as cryptoprenuer Olivier Janssens' Destiny on Nevis promise tax exemptions and independent governance. The architecture is consistent: carve out legal exceptions, attract venture capital, and strike a quid pro quo with host sovereignties.

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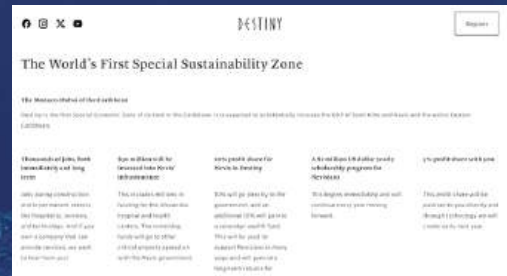
Frontier Valley is a company trying to establish a "special regulation zone" on a former Naval airstrip at Alameda Point across the bay from San Francisco that is "dedicated to accelerating frontier tech" with the stated goal of "...the US surpassing China in the AI and robotics race..."

Website link [here](#)



Próspera in Honduras bills itself as "a special economic zone in Honduras designed to create prosperity through economic freedom, rule of law, and innovative governance."

Website link [here](#)



Destiny is "special economic zone" located in Saint Kitts & Nevis billing itself as the "Monaco-Dubai of the Carribean"

Website link [here](#)

To understand where Freedom Cities might take cities generally, Dator's four futures archetypes offer a lens to examine how driving forces – venture capital, technological acceleration, political leverage, and the myth of sovereign escape – might interact across distinct trajectories. Exploring the impact of Freedom Cities via scenarios captures the structural tension at the heart of the movement: the desire to engineer escape from democratic friction against the inescapable realities of shared infrastructure, labor markets, and globalized interdependence. Mapping these drivers and tensions across different archetypes, helps us understand what might happen, revealing the institutional pressures, historical precedents, and civic choices that will ultimately determine whether these enclaves fragment our urban fabrics or force cities to evolve.

CONTINUATION

THE PATCHWORK EXPANSION

This is a city in which the libertarian exit myth matures into a permanent feature of the post-globalization landscape. Proponents successfully establish dozens of corporate enclaves that operate alongside traditional democracies, normalizing concepts such as tiered citizenship, private militaries, and medical tourism to access unregulated surgical procedures and treatments. This expansion cements a dual-track governance system where wealthy individuals have access to private citizenship frameworks while the broader public remains bound by standard, ailing democratic institutions. Wealth and the wealthy exit the nation-state hegemony and increasingly concentrates into Freedom Cities and Network States forming an information-age patchwork where corporate sovereignty is treated as a standard urban development model. Rather than replacing the nation-state, these zones function as specialized economic havens, fulfilling the tech elite's vision of insulated prosperity through gradual territorial expansion.



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THE FORTRESS FRACTURE

For the residents of this city, the reality of territorial escape is fundamentally impossible. When host nations revoke special economic charters or when early attempts at Freedom Cities face resource dependency, internal labor unrest, or military aggression from a nation-state or other malicious non-state actor – the illusion of sovereign insulation shatters. Libertarian exit projects consistently demonstrate that no amount of capital would allow any sizable settlement to fully detach from geopolitical realities, climate shocks, or shared infrastructure. The movement's core belief in technological self-sufficiency proves unsustainable without broader state protection and global supply chains. Even when a host nation is particularly amenable, the pursuit of absolute, corporate sovereignty triggers legal warfare, economic isolation, and public backlash; forcing the projects into bankruptcy or forced re-integration. The myth of the sovereign individual collapses under the historical weight of the physical and political interdependence of 21st century globalization.

THE ADAPTIVE HYBRID

In this city, traditional governance structures successfully absorb and adapt to the Freedom City movement rather than resisting or eliminating it. Facing mounting pressure for regulatory agility and technological acceleration, democratic institutions make strategic compromises, integrating deregulated innovation districts and streamlined approval processes into existing municipal frameworks. Rather than fracturing into competing sovereignties, the system stabilizes through a hybrid model where corporate zones operate under negotiated oversight, ensuring they contribute to broader economic and civic objectives, while allowing those who are wealthy enough or willing to swear economic fealty to these sovereignties as means of exiting legacy nation-states. Democratic systems routinely prove their capacity to absorb market-driven city-state experiments while preserving their foundational functions. The underlying libertarian myth of escape is partially fulfilled through structured innovation districts, but never quite at the expense of shared infrastructure or overarching collective governance. The movement's pressure ultimately forces institutional adaptation, demonstrating that robust, typically socialist democratic frameworks can integrate corporate sovereignty models without surrendering their core commitment to public accountability.

THE NETWORKED RECONFIGURATION

In this world, Freedom Cities trigger a resurgence of the city-state as the de-facto organizing structure for populations as the very concept of territorial sovereignty dissolves into a fluid, digital governance models. The success of early Freedom Cities causes megalopolises and urban agglomerations around the world to reevaluate their sovereignty in relation to the nation-states. Citizenship becomes programmable and portable, governed by decentralized networks and ideological alignments rather than mere geographic borders. The libertarian ideal of individual sovereignty and exit is technically realized but fundamentally re-contextualized, as algorithmic governance and crypto-backed legal and economic frameworks replace the structures of traditional nation-states. Systems to emigrate from one city-state to another fulfills the cyber-utopian dream of the original movement, yet in ways that completely dismantle historical notions of national identity. The result is a globally interconnected system of city-states where governance is fluid, decentralized, and increasingly entirely detached from physical territory.



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From the charter cities of the colonial era to the techno-libertarian economic exclusion zones being proposed today, the blueprint remains the same: carve out sovereignty so capital can dictate the rules and the “public” is treated as an afterthought. Beneath the venture-soaked lobbying lies a fundamental question about how we choose to inhabit and organize this shared space we call the Earth. Will we allow the hard-fought democratic nation-state hegemony to erode into tiered, corporate city-states where residency and civic life are services or, will we harness the legitimate demand for regulatory agility to build smarter, more responsive governance ecosystems with cities as the population centers at the core?

As professional futurists know all too well, the path ahead is unwritten, and the future is uncertain. The future of cities will likely, hopefully, not be decided by executive decrees or venture capital alone, but by the collective choice to build cities that level the playing field and expand opportunity for all rather than restrict it to some, and that measure success not by how well they keep people out, but by how well they bring people together.



Joe Carpita is a Chicago-based futures researcher and foresight strategist, specializing in helping organizations understand, envision, and plan for alternative futures. Joe has worked for over 15 years as a design, innovation, and foresight consultant and has led strategic foresight engagements for top companies including as Samsung, McGraw-Hill Education, Cox, and Proctor & Gamble. Joe is also a graduate of the world-renowned University of Houston Master's of Foresight program. Joe currently works for PepsiCo as the Senior Manager, Strategic Foresight & Futures Visions as part of PepsiCo's Global Design Innovation team.