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# For Whom Shall We Build?

*Yuval Levin*

**T**here is a lot to appreciate in the two bold cases for constructive confidence and confident construction that Marc Andreessen has put forward over the past half-decade.

“It’s Time to Build,” an article published on his website in April 2020, was an argument for recognizing the sources of our society’s material strength and returning to the work of producing the infrastructure for a prosperous future. “The Techno-Optimist Manifesto,” published in October 2023, was a more abstract statement of principles, seeking to articulate a worldview friendly to technological innovation yet (mostly) resistant to utopian temptations.

These are both denunciations of despair and rejections of passivity, and in that respect they are much-needed antidotes to the willful paralysis that oddly passes for sophistication in our elite culture now. But Andreessen’s diagnosis of the problem at times mistakes the deepest roots of our lethargy, and therefore undersells his case for the future. What the future needs first isn’t technology—it’s people.

**W**ritten in the earliest shock of the pandemic, “It’s Time to Build” insists that the United States was unable to produce some key necessities:

We don’t have enough coronavirus tests, or test materials—including, amazingly, cotton swabs and common reagents. We don’t have enough ventilators, negative pressure rooms, and ICU beds. . . .

We also don’t have therapies or a vaccine—despite, again, years of advance warning about bat-borne coronaviruses. Our scientists will hopefully invent therapies and a vaccine, but then we may not have the manufacturing factories required to scale their production. And even then, we’ll see if we can deploy therapies or a vaccine fast enough to matter.

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In retrospect, our country actually rose to these challenges fairly quickly and effectively. There were many other problems with our pandemic response, but a failure to build wasn't quite the right way to see those.

But the inadequacy of Andreessen's diagnosis ran deeper. "You don't just see this smug complacency, this satisfaction with the status quo and the unwillingness to build, in the pandemic, or in healthcare generally," he wrote. "You see it throughout Western life, and specifically throughout American life."

Smug satisfaction with the status quo is a strange way to describe contemporary America. Pretty much no one seems to think that all is well. More to the point, our failure to build for the future appears to be rooted not in a sense that it will turn out fine but in something like the opposite view: a catastrophism that can barely conceive of actually reaching the future at all.

Our politics now finds it difficult to speak practically of the future because almost everyone imagines there will be some terrible disruptive cataclysm between now and then—a climate catastrophe, a fiscal crisis, a cultural collapse, the end of democracy, take your pick. None of these scenarios is all that plausible. And the people offering these warnings don't really seem to believe them, as they are unwilling to make even modest political concessions to address them.

The warnings are offered up in part as excuses to treat the very existence of one's political opponents as a national emergency. But they seem mostly to be motivated by a perverse escapism: If the task of the present is to avert disaster, then we can put off the demanding and mundane work of building for the future. We can even claim to put off that work in the name of the future, by insisting that if we don't win this next election then there won't be a future.

The desire to avoid actually thinking about the future is not as strange, or as unusual, as it might seem. It is selfish, in a sense, or maybe vain. It often bespeaks a kind of vanity unable to imagine the world without ourselves in it, and to take pleasure in benefiting our successors. The future, after all, is the home of other people—people who will follow us when we are gone. To build durable infrastructure for future prosperity is to build for those other people. And the inability to value those other people and judge them worthy of our work and sacrifice is a characteristic failing of a decadent society.

**W**e are hardly the first such society. The phrase "time to build," which Andreessen evokes in his title, is an echo of the third chapter

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of the book of Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew Bible. Anyone who chooses such a title for a piece of writing (as I did for a book published a few months before Andreessen's essay) presumably has that allusion in mind, or at least must be prepared to awaken an awareness of it in his readers. In that chapter, we are famously told that

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what was planted. A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to tear down, and a time to build. (Ecclesiastes 3:1–3)

That passage is, perhaps less famously, a response to the expression of despair offered up just before, in the second chapter of Ecclesiastes. There we hear from a kind of builder—a man who has amassed great wealth and power and created much in the world by the work of his own hands. Yet when he contemplates the human condition, that builder is driven to despair:

And I hated all my labor which I had labored under the sun, because I should leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? But he shall have rule over all that I have worked to produce, and through which I have shown myself wise under the sun. This is also vanity. Therefore I turned to cause my heart to despair of all the labor which I labored under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 2:18–20)

The prospect of building a world that only future generations would enjoy drove this man to give up his work. His kind of vanity is a rejection of the human condition characteristic of some great men, and perhaps even great civilizations. And to correct it, we have to be reminded of the character and goodness of the human condition, in which birth and death, beginnings and endings, tearing down and building up each has its proper time, and in which both our moral and social imaginations must therefore extend beyond our own moment.

We fail to build in our time because we are in something like that vain great man's position. We direct our political energies to terrifying ourselves with imaginary visions of catastrophe rather than to building for the future, because we cannot relate to the future. We do not view ourselves and the denizens of that future as links in a chain. We do not naturally see ourselves as the beneficiaries of our fathers' and mothers' generosity, and so as owing the same to our children. We fail to take the long view.

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To take the long view is not to surrender to technological utopianism. The usual perspective of the technologist is actually also hostile to the long view. It often wants to make future generations unnecessary by extending the present one interminably. This is why technological utopians are so often beset by eccentric obsessions with life extension, cryopreservation, and other vain illusions.

Andreessen seems genuinely immune to that particular mad vanity. But his appeal to recover our interest in the future is nonetheless distorted some by his emphasis on the material and technical needs of that future, rather than beginning with its most fundamental need. The deepest sign of our loss of interest in the future is not the slowdown of technology, but the slowdown of fecundity. We will build for the future when we are invested in the people who will live there, and are willing to welcome them.

There are moments in Andreessen's two essays when he seems to see this. In "The Techno-Optimist Manifesto," in particular, he notes with alarm that many nations are depopulating, and he associates population with prosperity: "We believe material abundance therefore ultimately means more people—a lot more people—which in turn leads to more abundance."

But that framing of the point gets the causality backward, and so underplays the importance of actually populating the future. This becomes clearest when Andreessen considers the nature of growth:

There are only three sources of growth: population growth, natural resource utilization, and technology.

Developed societies are depopulating all over the world, across cultures—the total human population may already be shrinking.

Natural resource utilization has sharp limits, both real and political.

And so the only perpetual source of growth is technology.

This reasoning is an example of precisely the kind of blinding presentism that Andreessen claims he wants to reject: the idea that technological advance assures growth even in the absence of growing labor and consumer markets. This can work in the short term, but not over generations. Economically and otherwise, the case for building is at its foundation a case for thinking generationally.

This is the essence of our problem: We have been losing the inclination to take the long view, because we have been losing our capacity to conceive of our moral situation through the lens of the human condition.

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There are times when Andreessen seems to grasp this, too. He recoils from utopianism, for instance, on the grounds that it is somehow inhuman to forget our constraints. Yet there are other times when he resorts to the shallow utilitarianism of the technologist in ways that are precisely inhuman. In one fit of Silicon Valley daftness in “The Techno-Optimist Manifesto,” he tells us:

We believe any deceleration of AI will cost lives. Deaths that were preventable by the AI that was prevented from existing is a form of murder.

This is where utopian extremism often points—to embarrassing moral imbecility. But this is by no means Andreessen’s general tenor. On the contrary, implicit in the arguments of his two pieces is a keen perception of the necessity of humility. He calls on his readers to reject both despair and overconfidence, and to recognize the limits of human knowledge and power while also embracing the potential of human creativity and ambition. That spirit is distinct both from the utopian bluster of many technologists and from the dystopian bombast of much of our elite culture—both of which are suicidally short-sighted. It is a call for sanity.

**B**ut properly understood, this argument for building is not above all an argument for technology at all. It is a case for taking our future seriously as a home in which our society will live, and which therefore deserves our serious, practical attention. It is, in this sense, an argument for building more generally: for building institutions that can sustain human flourishing across generations, and for building both the cultural and the material infrastructure that will let those generations thrive. Some of that infrastructure will be technological, but that is not what matters most about Andreessen’s call for it. What matters most is that he wants to tell a society that has been looking to demolition crews for relief and liberation that relief and liberation could only really come if we form ourselves into construction crews. That is a message that we badly need to hear.

Andreessen’s formulation of that message would be deepened if he could connect it to a fuller anthropology—to an understanding of the nature of the human person and the character of human flourishing that could help him see that what we most need to build are families and communities, and that technological progress ultimately cannot be sustained without the kind of cultural confidence that makes itself evident first and foremost in a commitment to the next generation. There are times when this commitment does require some deceleration of technology. And

although such times are relatively rare, it is crucial that we not fail to perceive them by disordering our priorities.

Ultimately, the kind of humility we lack most is the willingness to understand ourselves as working for those who will come after us. Such humility, indeed any humility, is very rare among today's technologists, and so Andreessen's call for it is a welcome sign of seriousness and of health. He seems to grasp that building the future means building for others.

If Andreessen's warning against despair and paralysis is going to resonate, we will need to orient ourselves toward those others, and to see that our labors here, under the sun, can really only matter if the prospect of those who will come after us inheriting our handiwork can fill us with joy, hope, and gratitude. It's time to build for them.