

CityCraft: When Governing a City Becomes a Craft

A new book by Dr Neila Akrimi offers the first dedicated leadership framework for city leaders around the world

There is something strange about the way we talk about leadership. We have filled libraries with books on how to lead a nation, a corporation, an army. But mayors? Municipal directors? Elected officials who manage transport, schools, climate emergencies, migration, and social fracture every single day? Until now, they have had no framework truly designed for them.

That is the gap that CityCraft: The Art and Action of City Leadership in 6 Cs, by Dr Neila Akrimi, published by Éditions Leaders in 2026, sets out to close. An ambitious, singular, and deeply grounded book — rooted in the reality of cities that struggle, innovate, and strive to keep their promises to the people they serve.

Cities at the Heart of the World

The book's starting point is simple but carries enormous implications. For the first time in history, more than half the world's population lives in urban areas. By 2050, that figure will exceed 70%. Cities generate the majority of global greenhouse gas emissions. They absorb climate shocks, migration flows, and public health crises. They are, as Neila Akrimi writes, “the frontlines of global transformation.”

And yet cities still lack the autonomy, the resources — and above all, the language — commensurate with what is being asked of them. They are handed global mandates without the conceptual instruments to navigate them. Local officials are trained to manage projects and enforce regulations. They are rarely taught to govern with vision, courage, or moral clarity. CityCraft is a direct response to that gap.

The Art of Governing Cities

The book's title is a deliberate provocation. Statecraft — the art of governing nations — is an ancient and honoured concept. Why should cities not have an equivalent? Why should urban governance be reduced to administration, when it requires strategic vision, emotional intelligence, diplomacy, creativity, and moral judgment in equal measure?

CityCraft answers this question through a framework built around six fundamental capacities, which the author calls the 6 Cs: Clarity, Care, Coalition, Courage, Conscience, and Craftsmanship. These are not boxes to tick. They are ways of being and acting that any city leader can cultivate, adapt to their context, and deepen throughout their career.

The 6 Cs: A Living Framework

Clarity is the capacity to see through complexity. A city is not a machine. It is a living system of actors, interests, histories, and silences. The leader who governs with clarity does not merely analyse data — they map interdependencies, identify leverage points, and plan for a future that includes those the official maps tend to forget.

Care is perhaps the most misunderstood capacity — and the most necessary. Neila Akrimi is direct: you cannot govern what you cannot connect to. Care is the art of listening before deciding, of creating spaces where residents are not merely consulted but are genuine interlocutors. It is the discipline of governing from proximity, not from distance.

Coalition begins from a simple truth: no city transforms alone. The most necessary reforms fail not for want of goodwill but for want of alliances. The leader who masters coalition reads the political landscape, builds bridges across institutions, and mobilises support before they need it.

Courage is the discipline of acting with integrity when conditions are difficult. In cities, courage takes many forms: refusing a technology you cannot govern, holding a reform under bureaucratic resistance, communicating with radical transparency in a crisis, saying no to pressure for quick wins at the expense of long-term purpose.

Conscience is the ethical foundation of everything else. Every governance decision carries moral weight: where is the road paved first? Who receives housing priority? Whose voice counts in the public consultation? Conscience is the compass that does not move — the reminder that governing is a public trust, not personal power.

Craftsmanship finally, is the refusal of short-termism. Building a city is generational work, not the work of a mandate. The leader who embodies craftsmanship thinks in decades. They invest in institutions that will outlast them. They anchor their action in the identity of a territory — in what makes a city irreplaceable.

The Digital Challenge: Don't Buy What You Can't Govern

One of CityCraft's most original contributions is its treatment of digital technology and artificial intelligence as a core dimension of city leadership — not a technical footnote. In a

dedicated chapter, Neila Akrimi asks a question few elected officials dare to pose directly: are cities adopting technologies they do not understand, cannot modify, and whose consequences they cannot control?

The principle she proposes is simple and memorable: Don't buy what you can't govern. She illustrates it with the story of a city that deployed a social housing algorithm without understanding its internal logic – and unknowingly reproduced decades of discriminatory practice in its automated decisions. The accompanying Digital Governance Audit guides city leaders through five essential questions before any technology procurement.

Six City Portraits: The Framework Tested in the Real World

One of the most striking features of CityCraft is the way it grounds its framework in real governance situations. A full chapter presents six city portraits – composite pictures drawn from lived contexts across the world, each illustrating one or two of the 6 Cs at work under genuine pressure.

The post-conflict city that must rebuild trust before it can rebuild its institutions. The rapidly growing city planning for a population it does not yet know. The city in economic crisis communicating with radical transparency when everything invites silence. The fragmented city where multiple authorities overlap without coordination. The city seeking its future after losing its economic reason for being. And the global learner – well-resourced but aware of its own blind spots – that chooses to open itself to other experiences.

These portraits do not describe perfect cities or flawless leaders. They describe what it truly costs to govern with intention. And that is precisely why they ring true.

A Feminist Book – Without Being Exclusively So

CityCraft devotes a full chapter to women's leadership in cities – not as an appendix but as a demonstration. Neila Akrimi's argument is precise: women in governance have historically and consistently demonstrated the 6 Cs in their most integrated and courageous form, often against systems designed to exclude them.

Sharon Dijksma, Mayor of Utrecht and President of VNG, expresses it clearly in her foreword: "These capacities no longer feel like a framework to me. They feel like instincts – things I reach for without thinking, because years of governing have made them second nature."

The Toolkit: From Insight to Action

CityCraft's practical grounding is one of its greatest strengths. The book comes with a CityCraft Toolkit of fourteen instruments designed for direct use: urban systems mapping, stakeholder listening protocols, a digital governance audit, equity impact assessments, urban foresight labs, long-term city compacts, and more.

Nicholas You, former UN-Habitat advisor and Executive Director of the Guangzhou Institute for Urban Innovation, puts it plainly: "The toolkit at the end of this book is worth the investment alone. I have seen too many well-intentioned reforms fail not because the idea was wrong, but because no one had done the homework of mapping who held power, who could resist, and who had been left out of the conversation."

Seven Voices for One Book

CityCraft opens with a section titled Voices for CityCraft — seven forewords from deliberately diverse contributors: a European mayor and former minister, a vice-president of a Mediterranean metropolis, a global urban innovation expert, a secretary general of a network of regions, a former American city manager, a leadership scholar based at Oxford, and a systems thinker at the head of an international foundation.

Luca Gatti, Founder of the CHÔRA Foundation and former fellow of Harvard University, captures what many express: "CityCraft is a language of practice. It helps city leaders name the complexity they already inhabit. It reconnects the technical with the ethical, the strategic with the relational, and the future of the city with the dignity of those who live in it."

About the Author

Neila Akrimi has spent more than twenty-five years working alongside mayors, city officials, community organisers, and urban planners across five continents — from post-conflict municipalities in Africa and the Arab world, to rapidly urbanising cities in Asia and Latin America, to European democracies navigating new forms of inequality. CityCraft is the distillation of that journey.

A Book That Arrives at the Right Moment

CityCraft is not another book on leadership. It is a rare contribution: that of a practitioner who has chosen to give back to the people on the ground the language they need to name, understand, and elevate what they do every day. In a world where trust in institutions is eroding, where cities are called upon to fill the gaps left by states and markets, where

every local decision has global repercussions, a framework like CityCraft is not an intellectual luxury. It is a necessity.

“The future is not something we inherit. It is something we craft – city by city, leader by leader, choice by choice.”

— Dr Neila Akrimi

Book Details

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Dr Neila Akrimi is available for interview in English, French, or Arabic.

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