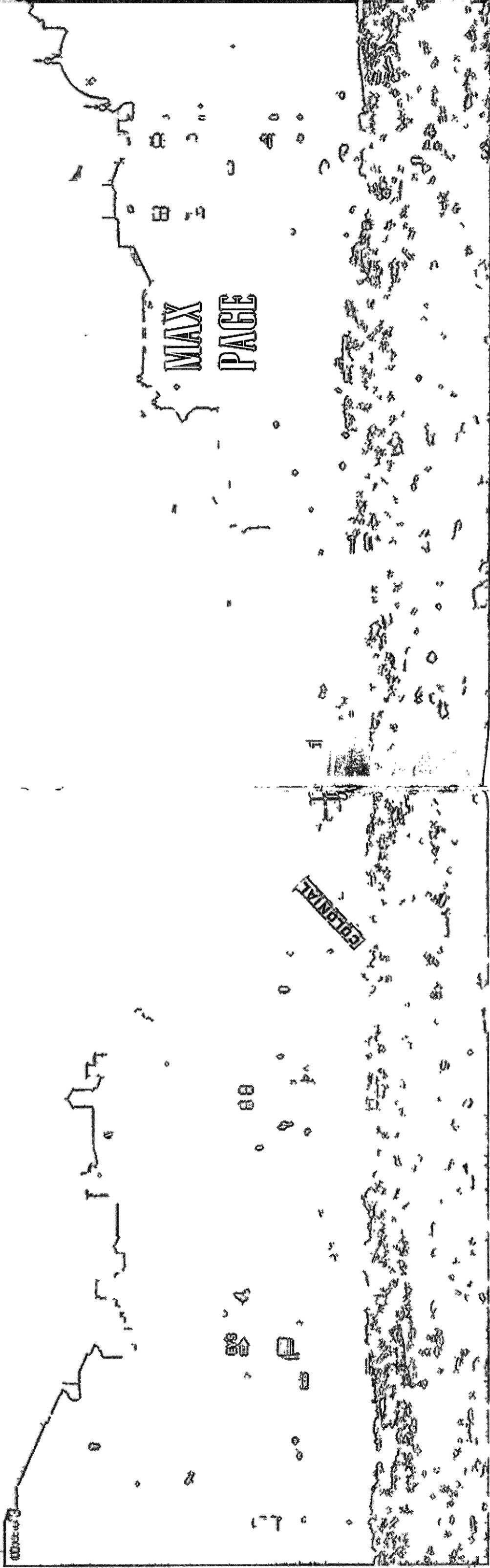


# THE CREATIVE DESTRUCTION

# OF MANHATTAN, 1900-1940



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# 1

## THE PROVISIONAL CITY

I could tell you how many steps make up the streets rising like stairways, and the degree of the arcade's curves . . . but I already know this would be the same as telling you nothing. The city does not consist of this, but of relationships between the measurements of its space and the *events* of its past. . . . As this wave from memories flows in, the city soaks it up like a sponge and expands. . . . The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.

—Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

In our town memories like rats are chased away by the ever-rising flood of progress. There is no room for ghosts or landmarks in New York.

—James Huneker, *The Pathos of Distance*

During his brief return in 1904 from self-imposed exile in Europe, Henry James played an eloquent variation on a powerful theme about New York: The city is “crowned not only with no history, but with no credible possibility of time for history.” New York is, always has been, and always will be, wrote James, a “provisional city,” defined by a “dreadful chill of change.”<sup>1</sup> From the time of nineteenth-century New York's great diarist, Philip Hone, who first declared New York's favorite maxim to be “overturn, overturn, overturn!” to today's Luc Sante and his biting critique that in New York the “past has no truck,” New York has lived up to its cliché.<sup>2</sup> It is a city where the physical remnants of early generations are repeatedly and apparently inevitably visited by the wrecking ball (see figure 1.1).

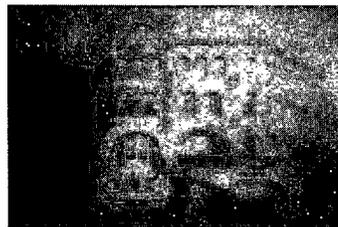
The trope of the “provisional city” has been a persistent metaphor for New York City. Scholars and teachers, novelists and critics, artists and poets have dipped into the waters of this metaphorical well to explain New York to itself and to the nation. Although historians have quoted the poignant voices of city dwellers to emphasize this quality of urban experience, they have never placed it at the center of the study of the process of city building and the experience of the modern city. Indeed, New York's casual as well as scholarly observers have dipped far more regularly into a different

well. They have preferred to perpetuate a view of New York—and by extension all cities—as growing rapidly but steadily, upward and outward. Terms such as “expansive” and “burgeoning” have attached themselves to descriptions of New York’s growth at the turn of the century.<sup>3</sup> The classic portrayal of the transformation of cities has been through a series of time-lapse photographs, the “then and now” comparisons, showing the city as something akin to a flowering plant. Each time this natural metaphor of city growth is repeated, it further obscures a crucial dynamic of urban life: the intentional destruction and rebuilding of the city.

By examining debates surrounding city building in Manhattan in the first four decades of the twentieth century, this book describes an urban development process whose central dynamic was not defined by simple expansion and growth but rather by a vibrant and often chaotic process of destruction and rebuilding. The upheavals of Manhattan were not the result of dramatic, isolated natural disasters or government-sponsored urban renewal projects but rather were necessary episodes in the process of capitalist urbanization.<sup>4</sup> In 1942, economist Joseph Schumpeter captured the essential process of capitalism—the never-ending cycle of destroying and inventing new products and methods of production—with his term “creative destruction”: “Capitalism is by nature a form or method of economic change and not only never is but never can be stationary. This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism. . . . To ignore this central fact is like *Hamlet* without the Danish prince.”<sup>5</sup> Nearly one hundred years earlier, Karl Marx had anticipated Schumpeter. “All that is solid melts into air,” Marx wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*, expressing the deeply paradoxical nature of the modern experience. The most concrete objects of capitalist society, the sociologist Marshall Berman has written in a modern interpretation, “are made to be broken tomorrow, smashed or shredded or pulverized or dissolved, so they can be recycled or replaced next week, and the whole process can go on again and again, hopefully forever, in ever more profitable forms.”<sup>6</sup>

By applying Schumpeter’s concept of economic creative destruction to the literal, physical destruction and creation of buildings and natural landscapes in Manhattan, this book shows how capitalism inscribed its economic and social processes into the physical landscape of the city, and then into the minds of city people.<sup>7</sup> Marx’s pungent phrase “all that is solid melts into air” applies to both the transitory physical landscape of New York and the social and cultural dynamism that came to characterize

Fig. 1.1 (film stills appearing at the bottom of pages in this chapter). The Star Theatre being demolished, 1902. American Mutoscope and Biograph Company. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.



the city. Schumpeter’s words—but not his celebration of capitalist innovation—suggest how the creative destruction of the physical landscape posed for New Yorkers the fundamental tension between creative possibilities and destructive effects of the modern city.

The broadest methodological goal of the following pages is to suggest that we place the process of creative destruction at the heart of the story of urban development. It is not a revisionist rejection of urban growth, an analysis that tries to describe the modern city as merely “destructive.” The aim is rather to highlight the fundamental tensions—both physical and cultural—at the heart of the urban experience. The literature on cities has either listed toward nostalgia for a better, lost time or veered sharply toward an embrace of “improvement” and “modernization.” In fact, the most accurate and revealing path is at the intersection of these conflicting beliefs. The “creative destruction” oxymoron suggests the tensions at the heart of urban life: between stability and change; between the notion of “place” versus undifferentiated, developable “space”; between market forces and planning controls; between economic and cultural value, and between what is considered “natural” and “unnatural” in the growth of the city. While some observers celebrate planning by destruction, or marvel at the rapid domestication of the natural environment, others decry the devastation of their homes and lament the passing of the architectural heritage of the city. Celebrated and condemned, encouraged and resisted, this process defines the experience of the city. It also poses in the most jarring manner the dilemmas of modernity.

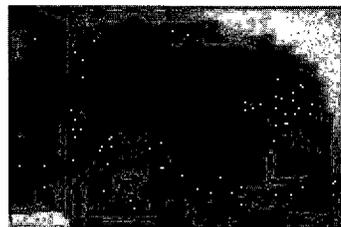
One of these central dilemmas has been the role the past would play in the modern world. “The most intractable of our experiences,” Aldous Huxley has written, “is the experience of Time—the intuition of duration, combined with the thought of perpetual perishing.”<sup>8</sup> This book explores the links between the transformation of the urban landscape and the shape of modern memory in early-twentieth-century Manhattan. The quest to be “modern,” in its often defiant rhetorical attempts to break cleanly with tradition, was in fact deeply enmeshed in the insistent demands of history.<sup>9</sup> One of the roles the landscapes of cities have played is to offer physical remnants of past times to present generations. “In the city,” wrote Lewis Mumford, the great architectural historian and cultural critic, “time becomes visible.”<sup>10</sup> What New Yorkers living in the first third of this century confronted so openly was a city



of their own making, in which they feared that in fact the opposite was true: time had become invisible.<sup>11</sup>

New York's landscape, a place swept by James's "dreadful chill of change," rarely offered the opportunity to look forward and backward. This did not mean, however, that New Yorkers abandoned the past. Contrary to the popular sense of New York as an ahistorical city, the past—as recalled, invented, and manipulated by powerful New Yorkers—was, in fact, at the heart of defining how the city would henceforth be built. Indeed, all of the diverse city-building efforts New Yorkers took part in and witnessed were shaped by the use and invention of collective memories.<sup>12</sup> Collective memories were fashioned and used with abandon by the city's builders, in complex and sometimes contradictory ways: by real estate developers hoping to enhance the prestige of Fifth Avenue; by historic preservation advocates seeking moral inspiration and assimilationist lessons through the preservation of historic landmarks; by tenement reformers eager to expunge deplorable memories of slums; and by street tree advocates who saw in nature a link to a more stable pace of change that would serve as a palliative for the ills of the modern city. In the ultimate capitalist city, where a square foot of earth in 1900 could command upwards of a thousand dollars, and where time itself no longer seemed a dependable substance, collective memories anchored in substances more tangible than words were a rare and powerful commodity. For those who had the capital to impose their economic and political programs on a wider public, collective memories became valuable tools in the development of space.

While New Yorkers exploited the past and rarely provided a satisfying answer about how tradition would be woven into the pattern of modern life, a consistent message endured for city builders of later years. Across the range of city-building endeavors—real estate development, slum clearance, historic preservation, street tree planting, historical interpretation—New Yorkers codified the idea that New York (and, by intimation, all cities) would be built through this vibrant but divisive, electrifying but inequitable, process. Despite potent attempts to arrest the "dreadful chill of change" in New York—through zoning and building restrictions along Fifth Avenue, or efforts to preserve historic landmarks—in the end even those most committed to slowing the pace of change and holding on to physical remnants of the past did their part to enshrine the trope of the "provisional city." Through observations of city building, by viewing the detritus of creative destruc-

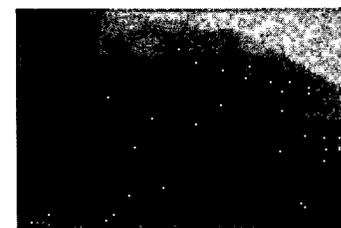


tion in museums, by glorifying depictions of change in paintings and photographs, and through the manipulation of traditions by private developers and equally savvy reformers, New Yorkers learned to see the cycle of destruction and rebuilding as "second nature"—self-evident, unquestionable, and inevitable.<sup>13</sup>

Manhattan in the first four decades of the twentieth century, from the Consolidation in 1898 to the World's Fair in 1939, is the logical place to study the tensions inherent in the city of creative destruction. Although the city's development in this era has been studied extensively, it merits a new look. Viewing the process of urban transformation through the lens of creative destruction means perceiving the dynamic upheaval of the urban landscape to be as much a defining characteristic of Manhattan in this era as the temporary products of the process—skyscrapers, tenements, bridges. This lens brings familiar subjects into new focus.<sup>14</sup>

Manhattan has promoted and experienced the process of creative destruction like no other city. Although the areas that became boroughs of Greater New York with the Consolidation in 1898 would be dramatically remade in ensuing years, city building was at its most vibrant on Manhattan Island. In the process of developing the land of the city to accommodate the five million people who would flow into Manhattan over the course of the first half of the century—laying sewers and subways, demolishing slums, removing smaller buildings for taller ones—New Yorkers created and confronted a city dominated by a destructive logic.<sup>15</sup> At the end of the nineteenth and in the early twentieth centuries, Manhattan experienced its greatest eras of transformation. In a generation, developers largely wiped away the city of brownstones and church spires and replaced it with the modern, skyscraper metropolis we recognize today. "New York is never satisfied with itself," wrote the editors of *Architecture* in 1927. "Its new buildings are scarcely occupied before they are torn down to make way for better ones. The great steel frames of its structures will never disintegrate from rust—they are scrapped before rust can start."<sup>16</sup> O. Henry may have captured New York's essence most succinctly: "It'll be a great place if they ever finish it."

The list of what was destroyed, and what was built and destroyed again in this era, is stunning. Individual monuments of American architecture and engineering fell regularly, often only a few years after being built: Madison Square Garden (figure 1.2), Temple Emanu-El, the Fifth Avenue Hotel, and the Waldorf-Astoria, to name just a



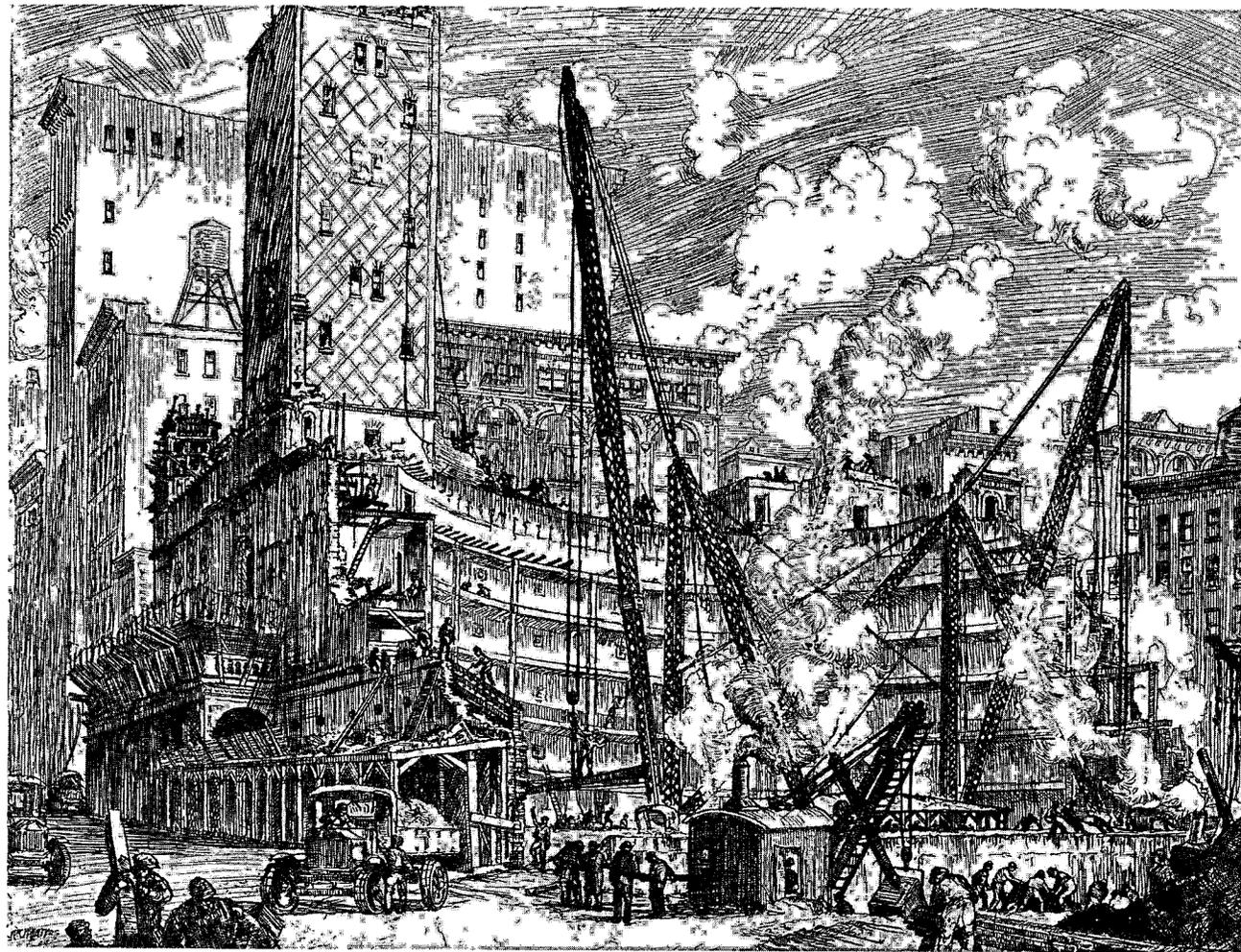
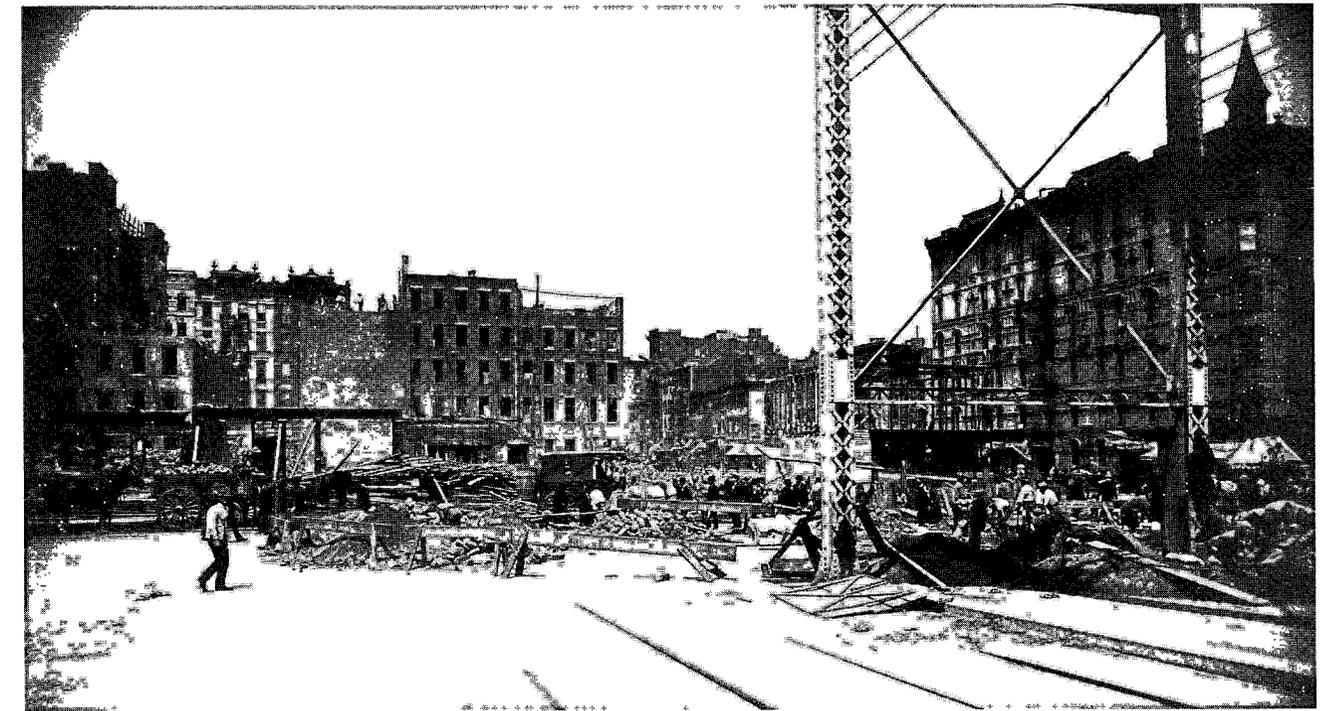


Fig. 1.2. William C. McNulty, *Demolishing Madison Square Garden*, 1925. Etching. Museum of the City of New York. Gift of Richard M. Lederer.

few.<sup>17</sup> Mansions of the wealthiest and most powerful Americans came down like dominoes in the 1920s, replaced by apartment towers and museums. But as stunning as the disappearance of important landmarks was the removal of the anonymous buildings that were the very fabric of the city. Rows of brownstones and acres of tenements were demolished to make way for widened thoroughfares, skyscrapers, bridges, and tunnels (see figures 1.3 and 1.4).



Equally important, this era was a time of unprecedented cultural interpretation of the convulsions of urbanization. Artists, writers, city leaders, and intellectuals all confronted with a striking intensity the problems and opportunities posed by a city undergoing “cycles of demolition and construction” (see figure 1.5).<sup>18</sup> For many, New York was the creative city *par excellence*, a place where new political ideals, as much as new artistic forms and architectural designs, could be pioneered. Avant-garde writers and artists now began to describe New York’s particular “sense of place” as precisely this sensation of vertigo amid the dynamism of a bustling commercial center packed with an overwhelming diversity of peoples. The physical transformation of the city was glorious because it gave visual form to the consciousness of its inhabitants. “The physical and architectural upheaval of the city,” notes cultural historian Ann Douglas, “was a symbol of its inner spirit . . . its protean ability to assume new shapes and discard old ones; the city changes before your eyes.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, John Dos Passos, Dorothy

Fig. 1.3. Delancey Street, from Orchard to Allen Streets, June 11, 1904. The Williamsburg Bridge required the demolition of hundreds of buildings to make way for the bridge approach. In the distance are the tenements of Allen Street, which would be demolished to allow for the widened road and the elevated train line. © Collection of The New-York Historical Society.

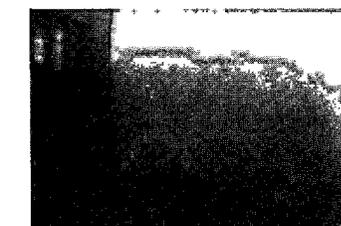
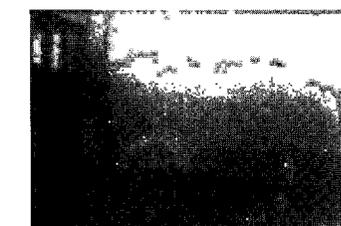


Fig. 1.4. George P. Hall, *Construction of a Building*. George P. Hall collection, 1902-1906. Museum of the City of New York.

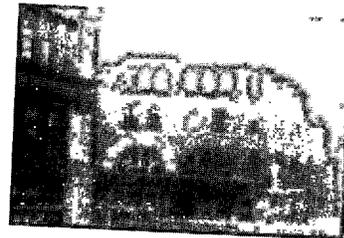
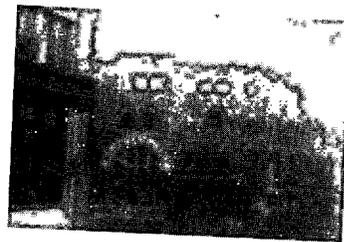
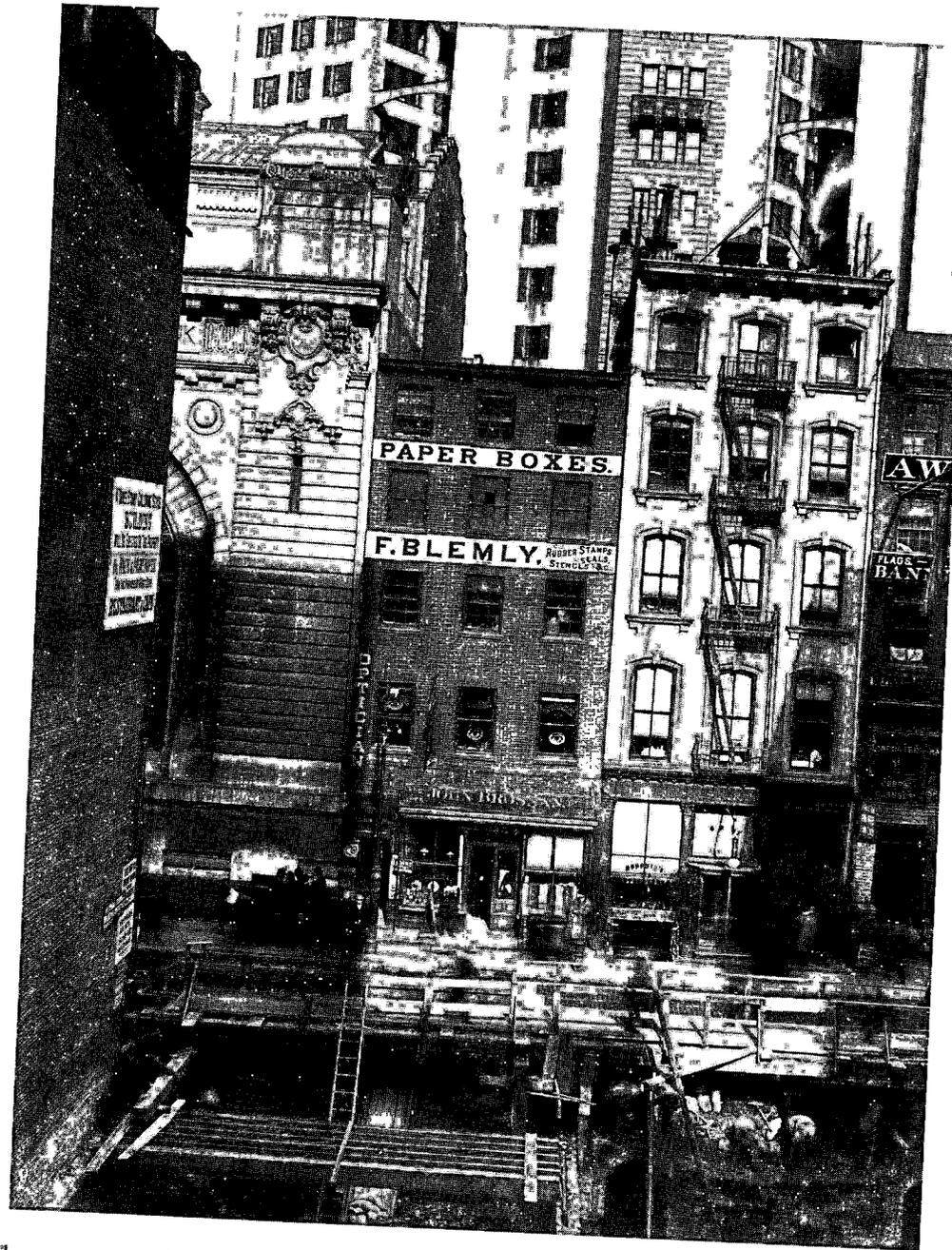
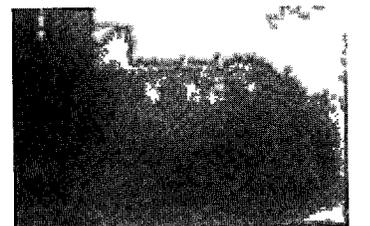
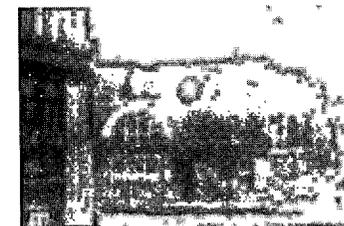
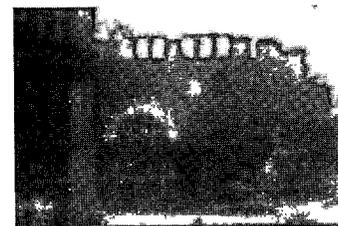


Fig. 1.5. George Bellows, *Excavation at Night*, 1908. Oil on canvas, 34 x 44 inches. Signed (lower right): Geo Bellows. Photograph courtesy Berry Hill Galleries, Inc., New York.

Parker, and others gloried in what might be called a landscape of amnesia, where the past would hold no authority and would offer no restrictions.

As E. B. White put it, the New Yorkers who came to build and define the image of the city, in stone and in words, were “born somewhere else and came to New York in quest of something.”<sup>20</sup> A majority of New Yorkers by the 1920s had come from elsewhere, with immigrants from small American towns and farms adding to the 40 percent who were foreign born, from places like Slovakia or Sicily.<sup>21</sup> In 1890 William Dean Howells had fictionalized his own move from Boston to New York in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. He was but one of an overflowing ferry of native-born Americans who were drawn to New York in this period—Hurston, Ellington, Fitzgerald, Wilson, O’Neill, Kern, Lippman—and would transform American culture in their new home. New York was the “city of final destination,” the ultimate city of migrants



in a nation of immigrants.<sup>22</sup> Many recent migrants reveled in the “gift of privacy” offered by a place with little social policing.<sup>23</sup>

Even for those who felt that Manhattan was the people more than the place, it was the skyscrapers and subways, the tenements of the Lower East Side, the mansions of Fifth Avenue, and the lights of Times Square that served as the essential stage set for the human drama of New York.<sup>24</sup> The landscape of Manhattan came to symbolize not only the city but the idea of “city.” That is why it is not surprising that controversies over the fate of specific places in Manhattan were suffused with contemporary battles over the most fundamental issues of the day: efforts to control and assimilate immigrants, to develop a democratic commercial culture, and to pose competing visions for government activity. Indeed, to a remarkable degree these social and cultural issues were played out on the stage of the urban landscape. What kind of “place” Manhattan would be—and hence, what kind of place the modern city would be—was intimately bound up with what kind of buildings were built and how the city changed over time. From the shape of the landscape and the nature of its transformation from past into future, New Yorkers gleaned insights about the shape of modern America. Thus, the “politics of place”—so central in urban development debates—was defined in this era by city builders setting the tools of memory to the substance of the urban landscape, in order to transform the metropolis.

Manhattan was, we can safely say, the proving ground for the American penchant for destroying the old. In the “landscape of American democracy,” Daniel Boorstin has written, “mental ties to the past are precious few.”<sup>25</sup> But New York has produced the inevitable antithesis to this national characteristic: the lament for a past that never was. Many New Yorkers, especially those who called themselves “old New Yorkers,” saw in the foreign and domestic immigrants, new forms of art and literature, and political ideas and social organizations trends that would be corrosive and destructive of “American” traditions. “To old New Yorkers,” observed *Vanity Fair* in 1925, “the real melancholy comes, not from the fact that the houses are soon to crumble into dust, but that the old and well ordered social fabric . . . has itself crumbled and vanished utterly from view.”<sup>26</sup> For these people, many progressives among them, nostalgia and a longing for a past city that was largely invented anchored their efforts to secure a sense of place. Gutzon Borglum, the sculptor of Mount Rushmore, noted that the “cruel thought” about New York “is the transient character of her life. . . . Her greatest build-

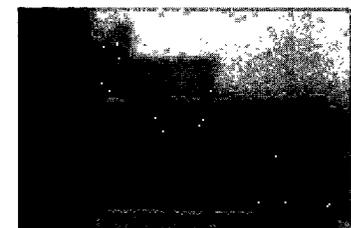
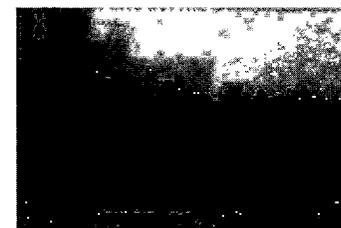


ings are ephemeral.” How, he asked, “can a people so transient develop municipal spirit?”<sup>27</sup> For many of these city builders and reformers, the destructive aspects of the city’s social and cultural life were reflected and perpetuated—but also could be solved—in the creation of new physical forms and in the protection of older landscapes.

To fully grasp the politics of place we must focus on specific sites and their development (see figure 1.6).<sup>28</sup> This book does not offer a comprehensive history of Manhattan in the early twentieth century, or even a complete history of city planning, tenement reform, or historic preservation.<sup>29</sup> Rather its goal is to link the histories of various city-building efforts—usually told separately—by showing how the politics of place pervaded and shaped these efforts. I locate the tensions inherent in the creatively destructive city in the battles over the planning controls for Fifth Avenue, efforts to return nature—in the form of street trees—into the heart of Manhattan, government-initiated programs for ridding the city of slums in the Lower East Side, and efforts to preserve “indoor” and “outdoor” physical landmarks of the city’s past. In these various battles lay the fundamental tension between a celebration of the metropolis—its dynamism and diversity—and a profound nostalgia born of a fear for what the modern city portended.

Chapter 2 describes the convulsive process of real estate development that reached its consummate expression on Fifth Avenue. I trace the reaction to creative destruction in one of its rawest forms: its role in shaping new attitudes toward city building and new efforts to manipulate the chaotic market in urban space. Even as Fifth Avenue symbolized in physical form capitalism’s most tremendous accomplishments, New York City also pioneered the most significant controls on urban space the nation had yet seen. Fifth Avenue’s history highlights the tension between the market forces at the heart of the celebrated dynamism of the city and planning controls that sought to shield particular places from change. History—in this case, the narratives invented and deployed by Fifth Avenue boosters—was a crucial tool for “preserving” the Avenue in its most profitable form. The resulting struggles over land and ideas provide an excellent window into the politics of place in Manhattan.

Shifting from the overdevelopment along the “spine of Gotham,” chapter 3 examines the problem of “underdevelopment” in Mulberry Bend in the Lower East



Side. The failure of the private real estate market to rid the city of its “foul core” inspired the city’s—and the nation’s—first wave of slum clearance efforts. While slum clearance has often been seen as the inevitable, “natural” solution to the tenement problem, the story of the creative destruction of tenements is, in fact, far more complex. Battles over slum clearance reveal fault lines in the beliefs of elite New Yorkers, the awkward adolescence of city government itself, and powerful cultural dilemmas concerning the assimilation of immigrants—all centering around these vilified buildings. Over the course of three decades, reformers and officials successfully promoted the physical elimination of tenements as the natural solution to the housing problem. It was a solution for which New York and its residents would pay an enormous price.

Chapter 4 focuses on the fight to preserve City Hall in order to explore issues surrounding the destruction of historic buildings and the rise in an ethos of historic preservation. Just a few blocks from the government-sponsored demolition of tenements, preservationists launched their first major battle to protect a historic landscape. City Hall was also at the heart of visions of the modern, redesigned “City Beautiful,” and thus highlights the tensions between planning and preservation, between protecting the past amid an overheated real estate market and creating new public buildings and spaces for the modern city. At the start of the century, preservationists articulated far-reaching ideas about how the past might coexist in the metropolis. By 1940, however, a narrowly focused preservation movement had become a partner in the speculative destruction of the city’s historic fabric.

Chapter 5 describes the “indoor” preservation movement that paralleled the “outdoor” preservation efforts of chapter 4. Bringing preservation indoors meant creating museum space and exhibits to preserve the city’s past. I study the founding and early years of the Museum of the City of New York, which pioneered period rooms and the use of visual materials to document the physical transformation of the city. The museum exemplified a booming “indoor” preservation movement that took hold, not coincidentally, just as the “outdoor” preservation efforts failed to make an appreciable change in the city’s landscape. In its work of collecting and displaying pieces of New York’s physical past, the museum enshrined a particular version of the city’s history, which emphasized physical change and celebrated the city’s growth, even as the museum lamented the passing of so much of New York’s nineteenth-century fabric.

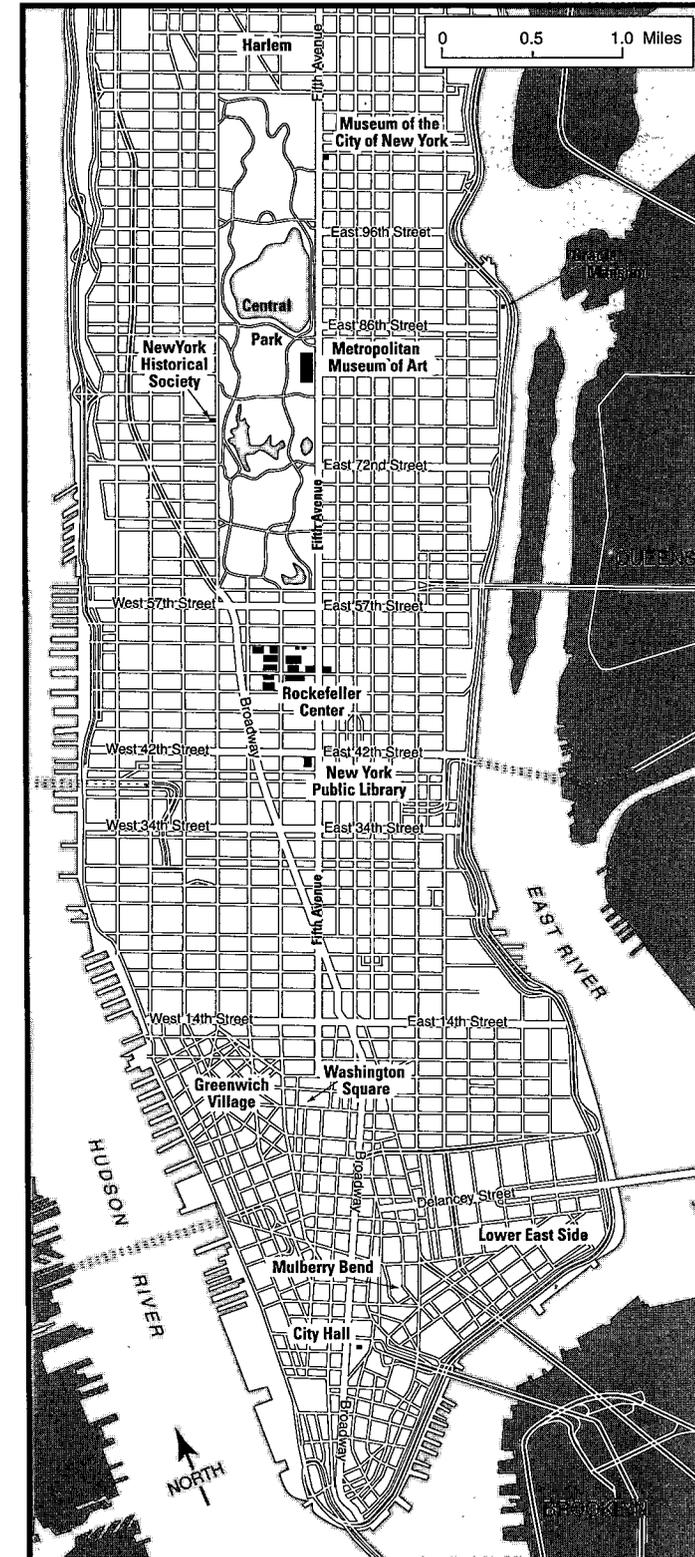


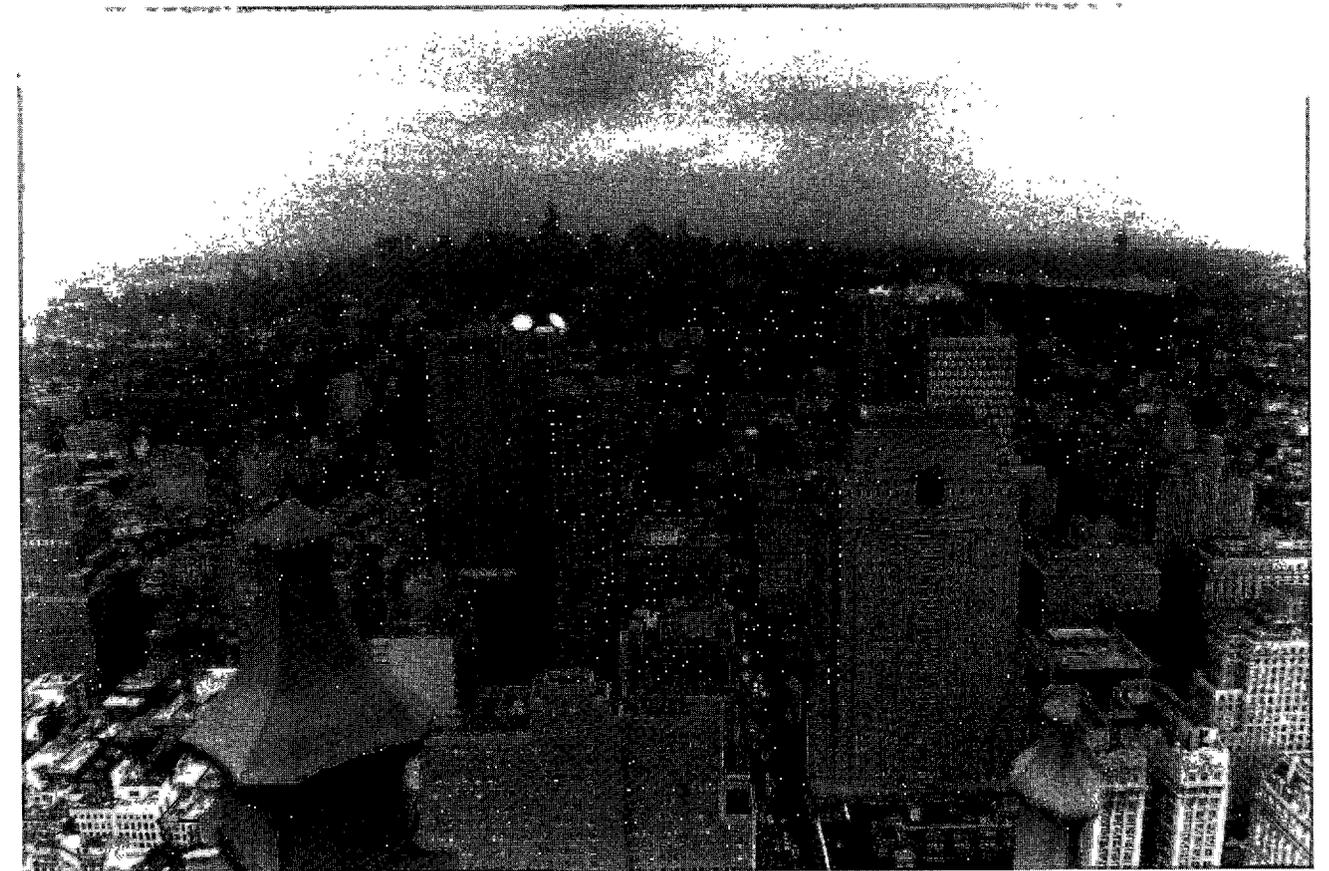
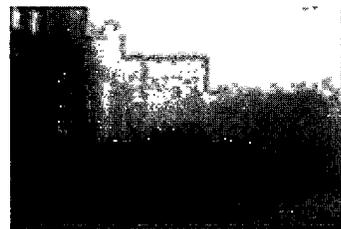
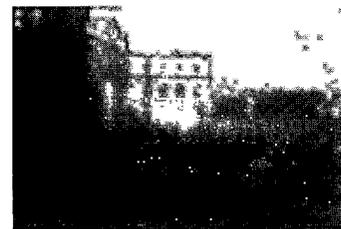
Fig. 1.6. Map of Manhattan. University of Wisconsin Cartographic Laboratory.

In the end, indoor preservation efforts served to rationalize the rapid destruction of the city's buildings and monuments.

Chapter 6 considers an unlikely topic—street trees. The tensions highlighted in the first five chapters—between market prerogatives and planning controls, between preserving the past for the purposes of education and assimilation and envisioning a new city, between creation and destruction—are highlighted in the most personal way in the problem of nature in the city. Chapter 6 describes the transformation of Manhattan's natural environment into a setting for real estate transactions and commercial enterprise, and a vocal group of social reformers' efforts to resist this transformation. I focus on the elimination of street trees, in order to approach the larger question of the contested place of nature in the early-twentieth-century city. At the cusp between private and public extramarket entities planted within the heart of commercial Manhattan, the fight over street trees reveals the tug-of-war between real estate developers, a growing government apparatus, and individual land- and home owners. Furthermore, the fragile existence of trees on the streets of Manhattan contributed to a widespread acceptance of a new truism for the city: constant, rapid change in its physical and social spheres was inevitable.

Finally, in chapter 7, I focus on the life of one individual. The figure of Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes—banker, architect, housing reformer and slum clearance advocate, historic preservationist, collector of prints and photographs of Manhattan, and author of a six-volume visual guide to Manhattan's physical development—brings together the variety of city-building projects explored in this book through one individual's experience. In his *Iconography*, a massive timeline and compendium of images of Manhattan from 1626 to 1909 (written between 1909 and 1928), Stokes in essence sought to assemble a “complete” record of a place. But even as he researched and wrote the book, the city underwent some of its most rapid and fundamental changes. Stokes's personal efforts to shape and comprehend Manhattan's physical landscapes of the present and past illustrate the tension between creation and destruction in the twentieth-century city.

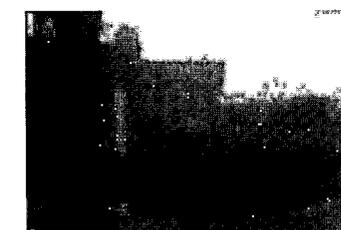
In 1935, a long-awaited visitor came from Europe to inspect Manhattan. Like Henry James, who had journeyed back to his hometown thirty years previously, the Swiss architect Le Corbusier came to see how well the most modern of cities



measured up. In Manhattan he found a perfect soapbox for pontificating about his vision of the modern city, a “radiant city” of mile-high towers, submerged highways, and wide-open park space. Accompanied by reporters and architects, Le Corbusier toured New York, walking the narrow streets of Lower Manhattan and gliding to the top of the Empire State Building.<sup>30</sup> Summarizing the essence of the island, he echoed James, declaring ephemerality to be the city's most defining feature: “New York is nothing more than a provisional city. A city that will be replaced by another city.”<sup>31</sup>

Though they used the same words, there was little similarity between these two men. For Henry James the “restless renewals” of Manhattan were a nightmare. The

Fig. 1.7. View northward from the Woolworth Building. Photograph courtesy of Iguana Photo.



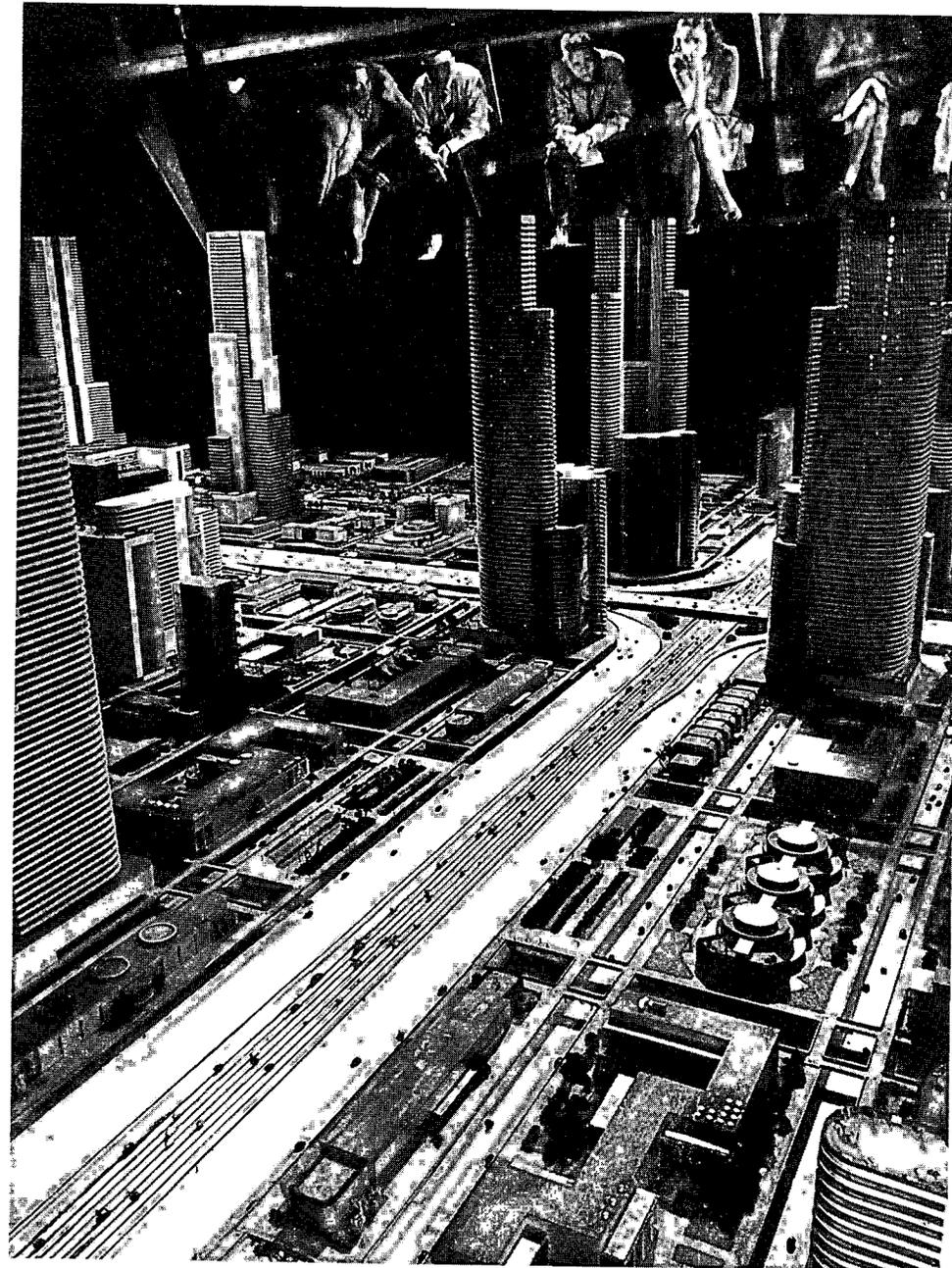


Fig. 1.8. Democracy Exhibition in the Perisphere at the New York World's Fair, 1939. The Norman Bel Geddes Collection, The Theatre Arts Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin. By permission of Edith Lutyens Bel Geddes, Executrix.



Fig. 1.9. Destruction of the Trylon and Perisphere at the New York World's Fair, 1939. Collections of the Municipal Archives of the City of New York.

city's mad, money-hungry speculation had brought down his boyhood home and replaced it with a factory, and his genteel Fifth Avenue was transformed by garish mansions of the nouveau riche. But what Henry James had considered an indictment, Le Corbusier now offered as high praise. New York was "a city in the process of becoming." He celebrated the city for being "overwhelming, amazing, exciting, violently alive—a wilderness of stupendous experiment toward the new order that is to replace the current tumult."<sup>32</sup>

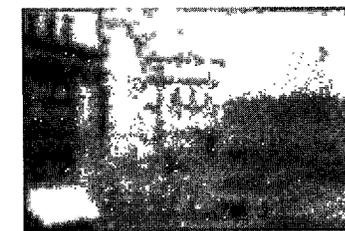
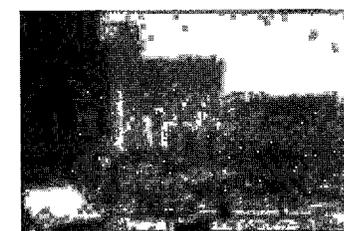
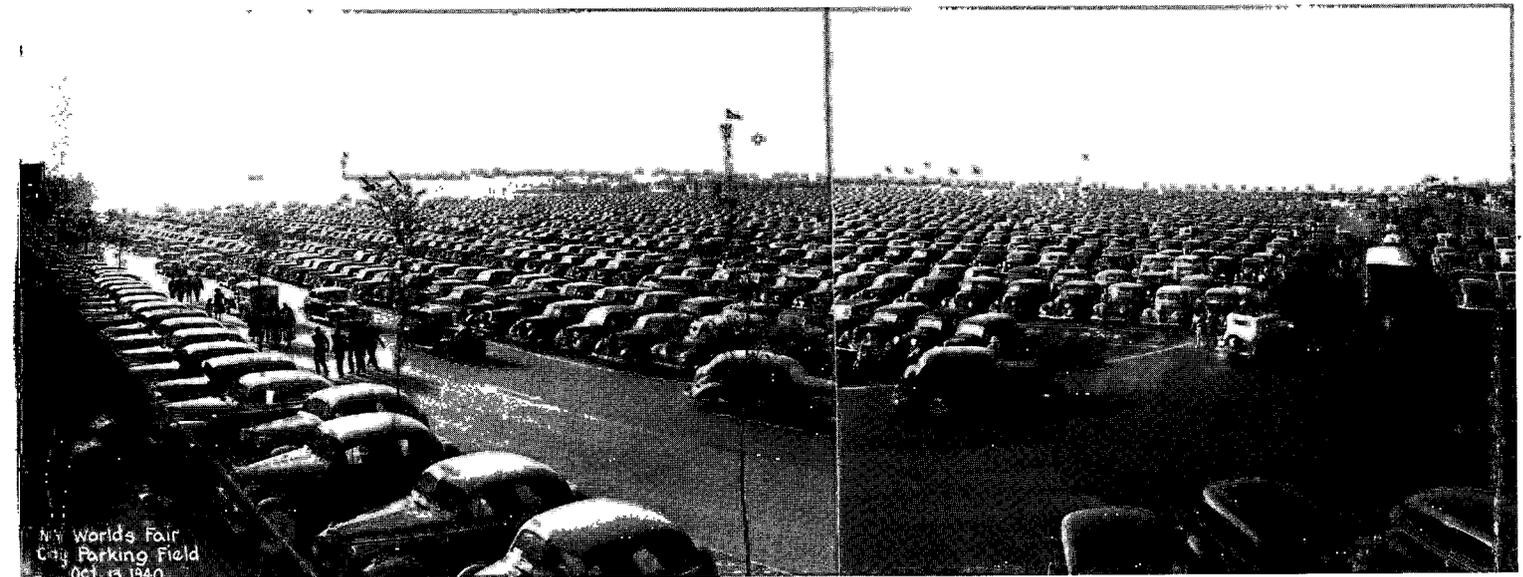
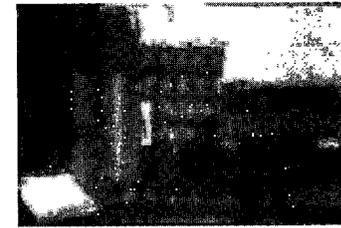
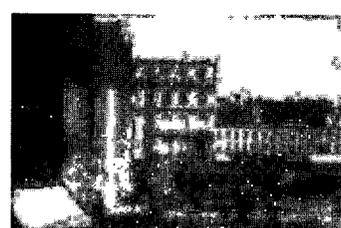
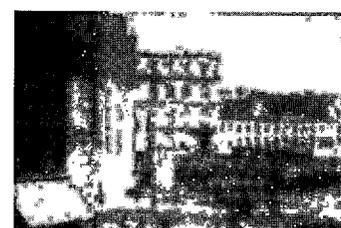




Fig. 1.10. A model home adapted from styles of the New England past for the postwar period, exhibited at the New York World's Fair, 1939. Collections of the Municipal Archives of the City of New York.

Indeed, New York was only a suggestion of what the truly modern city should be. In so many ways, according to Le Corbusier, New York had not gone far enough. The skyscrapers, though the tallest in the world, were “too small” and too appallingly disorganized. Far too much of the nineteenth-century fabric was left still standing. While Le Corbusier found the contrast between old and new, historical and modern, intriguing—he called the setting of the early-nineteenth-century subtreaury building on Wall Street, a charming, “accidental composition”—in general he believed that historic buildings had to go. “Older architecture,” Le Corbusier argued on his visit and throughout his writings, “is incompetent to solve” the modern problems of city life.

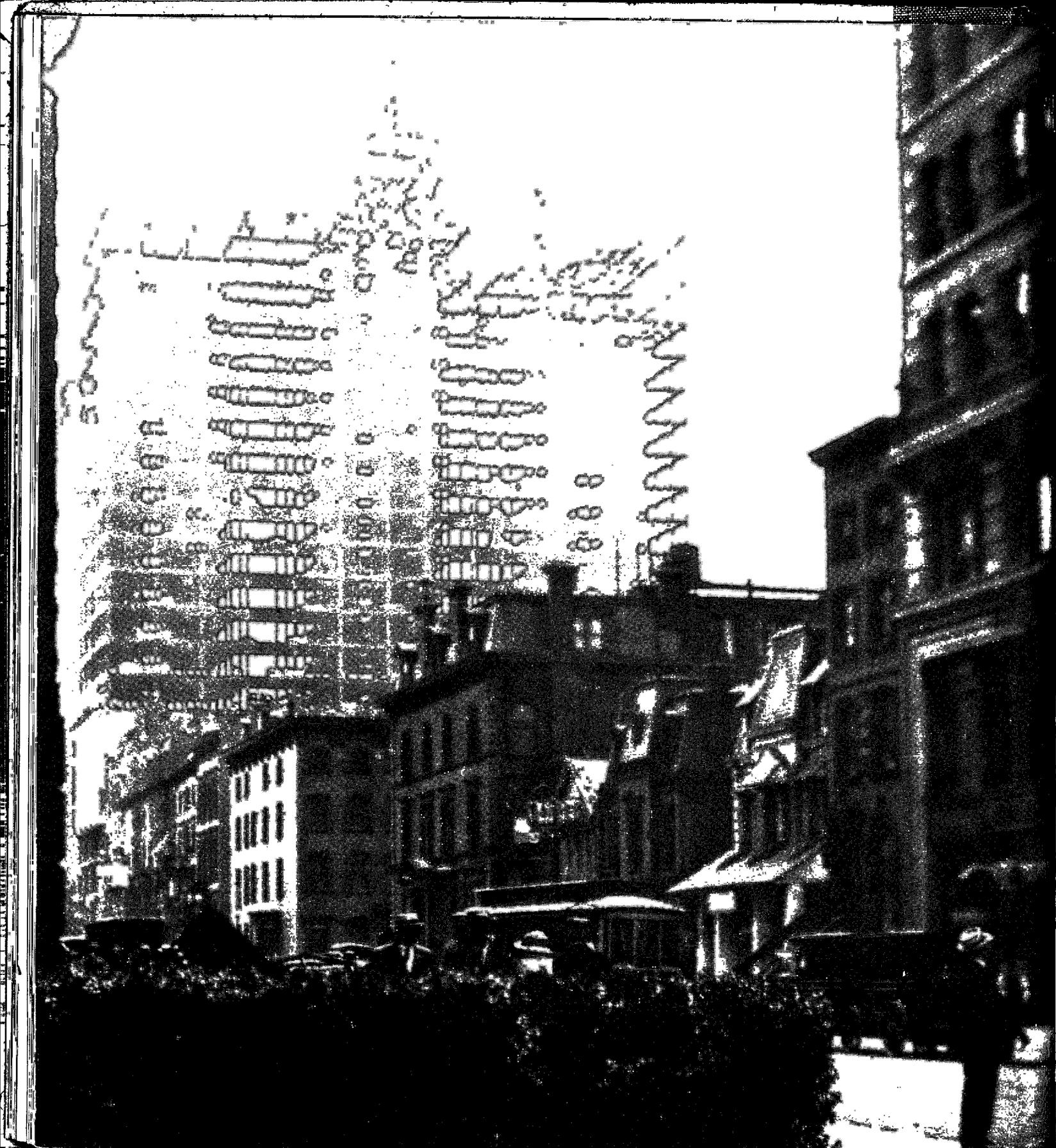
Le Corbusier journeyed to the top of the Empire State Building for a view of the city and to proclaim the future of Manhattan (figure 1.7). From his aerial perspective, which would be shared by so many planners in the postwar era, Le Corbusier



declared his faith in future processes of change: “The old city dies and the new city rises on its ruins—not gradually, but in a burst, suddenly—as the butterfly emerges from the cocoon of the caterpillar.” The World’s Fair, which opened four years after Le Corbusier’s visit, presented to New Yorkers Le Corbusier’s vision for the future. In the Perisphere—the white orb that, along with the Trylon, was the symbolic and physical heart of the fair—was General Motors’s Democracy exhibit (figure 1.8). From an aerial perspective, New Yorkers saw a city of sleek towers and wide highways that would replace the nineteenth-century city. Outside, in the temporary city that was the fair, they could visit model homes of the past and future. Afterwards, they would drive home on the highways that had already started to create that vision of the future (figures 1.9, 1.10, and 1.11).

A remarkable transformation had taken place in thirty years. Not only Le Corbusier but also New York’s city builders and imaginers, its developers and preservationists, had come to believe that the remaking of the city was not only desirable but possible—and perhaps inevitable.

Fig. 1.11. New York World’s Fair parking lot, October 13, 1940. Collections of the Municipal Archives of the City of New York.



## 2

### FIFTH AVENUE'S "RESTLESS RENEWALS"

#### Real Estate Development along the "Spine of Gotham"

It is a remarkable evidence of national prosperity. . . . It shows that the jubilant wealth of the country is manifested not only in the stock exchange, in capitalistic combinations and the purchase of foreign steamship lines. There are pessimists, of course, who declare that all these things are only signs of delirious extravagance; that the end will come, the bubble burst and our money-madness subside into peaceful sanity. If the baseless fabric is to be dissolved, the splendid pageant created along Fifth Avenue will make a most phenomenal ruin—a wondrous reminder to coming generations of the great American age of gold.

—Burton J. Hendrick, "The New Fifth Avenue"

Thus it goes in this great town—sections changing so rapidly that the New York of one generation remains little more than a memory to the next. And of all the changes none have been so impressive as those which have come to Fifth Avenue—New York's street of streets, its wonderful thoroughfare known the world over.

—*Real Estate Record and Builder's Guide* (1924)

In 1904, Henry James left his self-imposed exile in Europe and returned to the United States. The journey was partly nostalgic, giving him an opportunity to search out his old haunts and homes in New York and Boston. But like most attempts to relive the past, this visit was a disappointment, if not a disaster. Expecting to return to the city of his youth, James instead found a radically changed city, where vulgar pursuit of profit manifested itself in gaudy, ostentatious buildings. Returning from Europe, a continent of ancient cities stretching back several millennia, James found in New York only a "provisional city" (see figure 2.2).<sup>1</sup>

On Fifth Avenue, James found the soul and source of the destructive spirit he sensed throughout his travels. For Fifth Avenue spun through cycles of construction and destruction at a rate unmatched in the city. The Avenue, and the city as a whole, had become a "monster of the mere market."<sup>2</sup> In the course of only a hundred years, the Avenue had been transformed from an empty country road into a "millionaire's mile" of

Fig. 2.1. Alfred Stieglitz, *Old and New New York*, 1910. Alfred Stieglitz Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Fig. 2.2. Berenice Abbott, *Numbers 4, 6, and 8 Fifth Avenue*. March 6, 1936. A few of the remaining brownstones at the beginning of the Avenue, not far from the boyhood home of Henry James, are captured by Berenice Abbott, the finest chronicler of New York City in the 1930s. Her *Changing New York* was completed under the aegis of the Works Progress Administration. Museum of the City of New York.

estates and then into a densely inhabited line of wealthy apartments, stores, and manufacturing lofts. If we are to locate and understand the essence of the creatively destructive logic of private real estate development—the primary engine of Manhattan’s continuous transformation—it is to Fifth Avenue, the “spine of Gotham,” we must look.<sup>3</sup> This chapter describes the process of real estate development that reached its consummate expression on Fifth Avenue, and then traces how the reaction to this process in one of its rawest forms inspired new attitudes toward city building and regulation.

The histories of Fifth Avenue’s rapid development and the efforts to control it have been told before.<sup>4</sup> But these events are usually described as virtually inevitable outcomes of what is commonly referred to as the “march uptown” and as expected responses to normal problems of urban growth. What is usually ignored is the creation of the identity of Fifth Avenue as valuable, a place worth “saving.” For at the heart of Fifth Avenue’s growth, and the efforts to preserve it, lay the “illogic” of its cultural values and the social meaning attached to the place.<sup>5</sup> What makes Fifth Avenue so fascinating is its hold over the imaginations of New Yorkers and Americans more generally. It has been called the “Via Maxima of the Metropolis,” the equivalent of Paris’s Rue De la Paix and London’s Bond Street. One guidebook perhaps encompassed what so many have said: “There is but one Fifth Avenue. New York is understood.”<sup>6</sup> Although the allure of Fifth Avenue has receded from its height in the first years of the twentieth century, it remains an indelible part of our vocabulary, an adjective that lends exclusivity to any noun to which it is attached. An apartment with a Fifth Avenue address, a parade whose route runs along it, or a store with the Avenue in its title—Saks Fifth Avenue—immediately jumps in value.<sup>7</sup> In the first decades of the century, as the entire island was a churning landscape of development, redevelopment, destruction, and construction, few places received the attention Fifth Avenue did. Virtually every demolition, every construction project, and every increase and decrease in property values was recorded and reported.

Fifth Avenue captivated writers and citizens of the time because it represented like no other street in New York the forces of capitalist industrialization remaking America. The “spine of Gotham” was, in many ways, the symbol and reality of capitalist America, with its gleaming wealth, aspirations to outdo European civilizations, and chaotic, greedy manipulation of the landscape for profit. What happened on Fifth Avenue—what was designed on it, who lived there, what was sold, and, equally important, the process by which Fifth Avenue was built and rebuilt—informed people around the nation about the growth of cities.

The history of Fifth Avenue lies in the interaction between Fifth Avenue as a place of intense economic processes and a complex cultural symbol, a locus of invented traditions. For Fifth Avenue was, in one sense, nothing more than an idea, an image that lent great prestige not only to those who lived there but also to those who traded in the land represented by its name. Fifth Avenue thus exemplified the apparent detachment of real estate transactions from the actual creation of homes and businesses. The process of disassociating property from its physical dimension has, of course, a long history, bound up with the rise of capitalism and its commodifying logic.<sup>8</sup> In the Progressive Era, legal rulings codified the intangibility of property, translating the defini-

tion to focus primarily on the market value of all varieties of property. Land was now defined not as a physical place but as a commodity like any other.<sup>9</sup> But if the ability of capitalism to sever the connections between product and production—or between a product and its source—was ever to be seen, it was in the translation of the solid rock of Manhattan into numbers on a page. Marx's description of capitalist logic where "all that is solid melts into air" was most jarringly apparent in the trading of land and buildings as if they weighed little more than the paper on which they were exchanged.

And yet, Fifth Avenue was most assuredly a "place." In fact, the extent to which Fifth Avenue was sketched, painted, photographed, analyzed, and interpreted made it one of the most visually "imageable" of all New York City neighborhoods.<sup>10</sup> It was at once a string of homes sheltering familial and personal attachments, a prestigious business neighborhood providing luxury goods to the wealthy, and a work site for thousands of immigrant textile laborers. Those who lived, worked, sold, and purchased there had stakes—often, as we shall see, competing and clashing—not only in the idea of Fifth Avenue, but in the physical place itself.

This accounts for the peculiar paradox of Fifth Avenue: even as it displayed the "pure" market forces that drove the creative destruction of New York, Fifth Avenue became, in the early years of the twentieth century, the center of intense efforts to resist that market's destructive dynamic and to preserve a particular, tangible sense of place. Indeed, Fifth Avenue, the ultimate market in private property, was also one of the most regulated pieces of land in the nation. The modern methods of controlling urban land values, uses, and aesthetics all found some of their first trials on Fifth Avenue. Fifth Avenue was the site of one of the earliest business districts and business district associations; it was influential in the passing of America's first comprehensive zoning law (the 1916 Zoning Resolution), and it was subject to informal as well as legal restrictions on architectural form. Simply put, even as it was seen as a symbol for nothing less than America's wealth generated by "free" capitalistic entrepreneurship, Fifth Avenue was the birthplace of modern city planning and some of the most far-reaching efforts at controlling the capitalist market in space.<sup>11</sup>

#### THE "VIA APPIA OF OPULENCE": SOURCES OF FIFTH AVENUE'S DEVELOPMENT

Fifth Avenue's transformation is, indeed, stunning. Looking back from 1907, A. C. David reported simply that "there is nothing precisely similar to this range of real estate values anywhere else in the world. There is certainly nothing approaching it anywhere in this country."<sup>12</sup> In the previous six years, David reports, the Avenue had seen



Fig. 2.3. Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street, circa 1920. The Fifth Avenue Association sought to reform many of the "nuisances" of doing business along the Avenue, as seen here: traffic, "gaudy" advertising, and crowds. Temple Emanuel, with its two towers on the east side of the street (left), would be demolished in 1926 to make way for an office building. The large brownstone at the northeast corner of Forty-second and Fifth would remain until the early 1990s, a bizarre holdout at one of the most prized locations in New York. Collections of the Municipal Archives of the City of New York.

an average 250 percent increase in property values. The typical Manhattan 100-by-25-foot lot along Fifth Avenue had cost \$125,000 in 1901; \$300,000 in 1906; and \$350,000 to \$400,000 in 1907.<sup>13</sup>

But it was not simply the rise of real estate values that encapsulated the intensity of the trade in urban space. Rather, the power of real estate was made manifest in the speed with which old buildings—often actually quite young—were torn down. An

indication of the speed of Fifth Avenue's transformation comes from a measure of the disappearance of single homes. In 1902, there were some fifty-eight brownstone houses along the Avenue between Thirty-fourth and Forty-second Streets. By 1910 there were half that number. Furthermore, most of the remaining brownstones were already headed for demolition; they had been converted into hair salons and clothing and jewelry stores. By 1930, virtually all of these properties had been demolished for large lots upon which department stores such as B. Altman, Bonwit Teller, and Lord and Taylor could be built (figure 2.3). The land along Central Park north of Fifty-ninth Street, which had long been the last escape for elite New Yorkers seeking to build private homes in Manhattan, was already disappearing by the turn of the century.<sup>14</sup> The only way to build on the Avenue, which continued to be the "nexus of fashion," was to replace the old with the new. "It is natural," wrote the *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide* (hereafter, *RERBG*) in 1901, "now that this process [of building along Fifth Avenue] is tending to completion, that there should be a tendency for values in this part of the Avenue to increase still further, and as they increase, the inducement will be the greater to tear down the old remodeled buildings that now dominate the Avenue. . . . at the present rate of progress, there will remain five or six years from now few traces of the . . . brownstone period."<sup>15</sup>

Fifth Avenue exemplified more than any other place on the island the nature of what Henry James called the "provisional city." Homes—often substantial brownstones or even marble mansions—fell regularly, sometimes within a decade of having been built. Even mansions built on the "Millionaire's Mile" along Central Park rarely had a life span exceeding forty years. And even when buildings remained for a few years, they changed hands with incredible rapidity. "The history of the various deals and changes in ownership of this mile and a half," Louise Reynolds wrote in 1916, "would fill a volume and it is like the shuffling of a pack of cards."<sup>16</sup> Finally, the rapidity with which farmland and small communities of Upper Manhattan were leveled and settled with grandiose mansions became one of the most powerful images of private real estate's power (see figure 2.4).

Fifth Avenue developed in reaction to the cycle of building and rebuilding in Lower Manhattan. The Commissioners Plan of 1811, which laid down New York's grid of streets, had included Fifth Avenue, but it was not until 1824 that the street was laid out; it remained undeveloped above Fourteenth Street until the 1850s. After the Panic of 1837, Manhattan resumed its heady growth—especially after 1845, when the Croton Aqueduct was completed. In the following decade, the population of the city doubled, leading to the fabled "march uptown" by the wealthier classes.<sup>17</sup> The expansion of the commercial and industrial activity swallowed up the serenity of elite

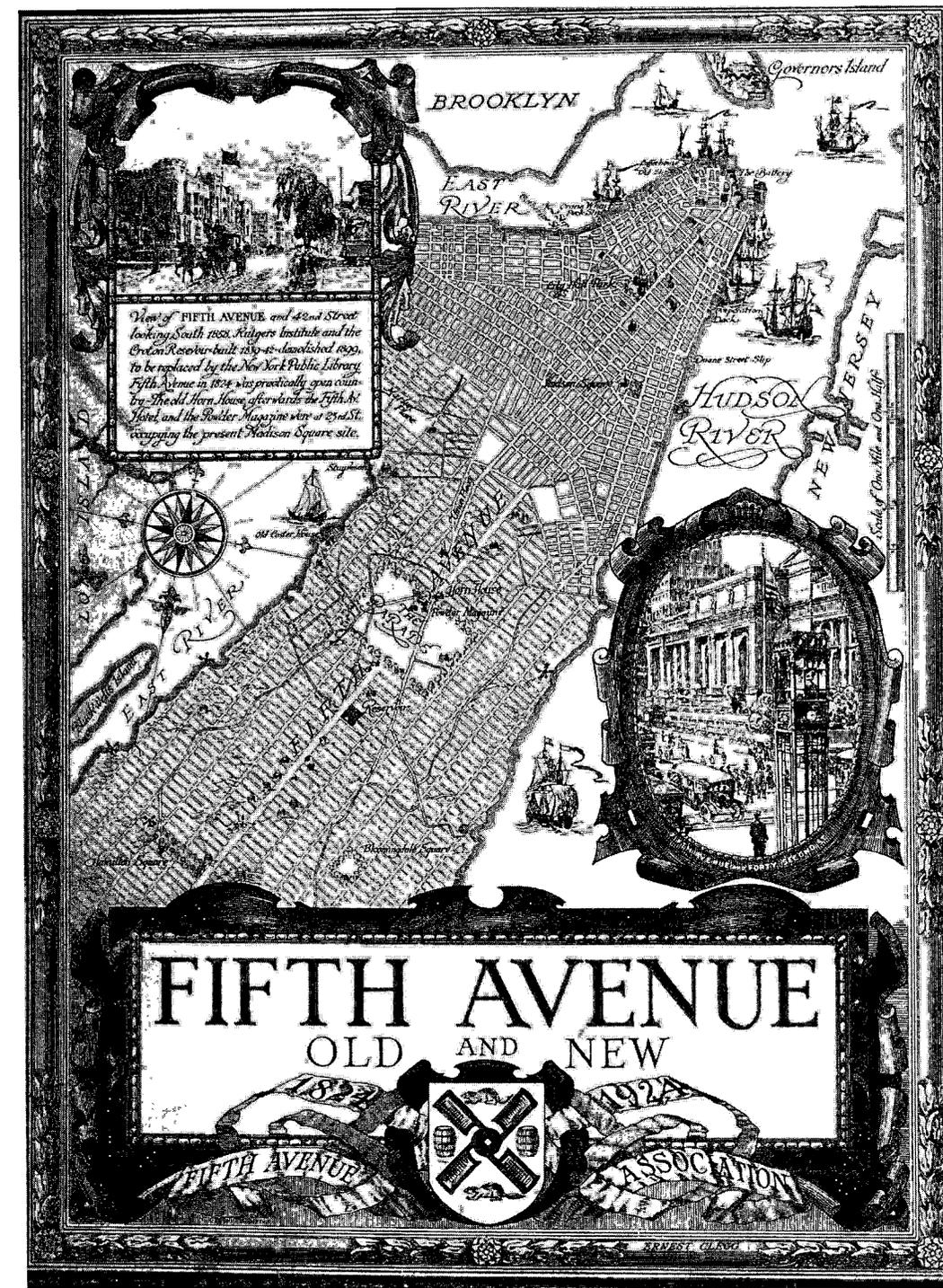


Fig. 2.4. Cover of Henry Collins Brown, *Fifth Avenue, Old and New, 1824-1924* (Fifth Avenue Association, 1924). Boosters who celebrated the hundredth anniversary of the FAA would repeatedly tell the tale of the small country road (inset, top left) that became the "spine of Gotham" (inset, below right). United States History, Local History & Genealogy Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

residential areas such as Washington Square, sending those families looking for escapes from the noise and crowds of business. At the same time, civic leaders became more alarmed by the crowding of Lower Manhattan, convinced that this had caused the 1832 and 1849 cholera epidemics. The belief that public parks could serve as “lungs” for cities, not to mention provide desperately needed recreational space, had a strong following. Rural cemeteries, such as Mount Auburn in Boston and Greenwood in Brooklyn, were ample evidence of the value of bringing “rural sights and sounds in[to] the midst of the city itself.”<sup>18</sup>

Thus, the transformation of the land beyond Fourteenth Street, and then beyond Twenty-third, Thirty-fourth, and Forty-second Streets, was motivated by a desire to escape the rapid development of Lower Manhattan. The elite settlers of Fifth Avenue in the second half of the nineteenth century played a desperate game of catch-up as the “virtually insatiable demands for office and retail space” pushed their search for quiet, exclusively residential areas ever northward and away from the river edges where industrial development was greatest.<sup>19</sup> It was to Fifth Avenue that the wealthiest families in America gravitated, to embody their far-flung wealth—in western mining companies, railroad lines, steel plants—in bricks, mortar, and, more typically, marble. “This zone at once became the Mecca of American millionaires,” wrote one critic. “The possessors of suddenly acquired fortunes, it would seem, could hardly wait to ensconce themselves within its sacred confine.”<sup>20</sup>

The development of Fifth Avenue as a residential and elite shopping street had slowed by the end of the century. The market itself had overheated, creating a lack of lots for building and land prices so high that few could afford to build private mansions along the Avenue. Furthermore, the Depression of 1893 stalled virtually all building projects until the beginning of the new century. The numbers of new private homes along Fifth Avenue (and in Manhattan as a whole) declined precipitously.<sup>21</sup> This, however, did not signal a corresponding decline in Fifth Avenue development. With few individuals willing or able to build private homes, manufacturers—eager to join the elite cadre of Fifth Avenue businesses and be close to the rail and transport centers of the East and West Sides—began to take over space along the Avenue. The image of an elite residential neighborhood was now appropriated by manufacturing and retail firms. Above Fifty-ninth Street, the Avenue remained one of the most elite residential areas in the city, a solid wall of wealth across from the park. But the continued pressures on land values, and the push to squeeze profits out of a finite amount of land, spurred a new wave of destruction and rebuilding. Just as the wave of mansion building crested in the late 1890s, the first luxury apartment buildings were erected on the lots of recently demolished mansions.

The transformation of the Avenue was accelerated by the passage (on 25 July 1916) of the 1916 Zoning Resolution. The ordinance, the culmination of a long fight that I will discuss in a following section, subjected all land in Greater New York City to controls on use and development. First, the city was divided into zones, where different types of uses—unrestricted, residential, and business—would be allowed. Second, in order to prevent such notorious structures as George Post's Equitable Building (a sheer cube of offices covering an entire block on Lower Broadway near the City Hall, which had become a touchstone for critics of skyscrapers), the law restricted the amount of a site that could be built upon. Finally, and most importantly for the Fifth Avenue Association, the law limited heights, using an elaborate formula based on the width of the street, in order to allow more light and air into the city's streets. On most major avenues in Manhattan, the ordinance permitted buildings to rise twice the width of the street—150 feet on a 75-foot-wide street—before “stepping back” a foot for every two-foot elevation thereafter.<sup>22</sup> The resulting ziggurat-like form of Manhattan's skyscrapers in the 1920s and 1930s—though not intended by the authors of the 1916 ordinance—was in part a response to efforts by architects to literally design buildings within this setback constraint.

Although World War I delayed the transformation of Fifth Avenue, in the 1920s it was the 1916 Zoning Resolution that provided the legislative framework for a rapid development of tall commercial and residential towers along the Avenue, and the elimination of the nineteenth-century brownstones. As I will discuss, although the Zoning Resolution inhibited the extreme development of a lot of land—a sheer tower three hundred feet tall on a narrow lot was impossible under the ordinance—it ultimately speeded development by preventing uses and forms that might have destroyed the allure of Fifth Avenue.

Thus, beginning in the late nineteenth century but exploding after World War I, Fifth Avenue was remade into a line of skyscraping apartment houses for the wealthy. The last inhabitants of the mansions lining the Avenue and the new wealthy class fled for the suburbs or took refuge in the apartment towers. Their former homes were promptly demolished to make way for high-rise apartments or were saved as part of some of the first preservation efforts conducted by organizations such as the Municipal Art Society and the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Societies. Other mansions were converted into museums, beginning the process whereby “Millionaire's Row” became “Museum Mile.” In 1940, when the *WPA Guide to New York* was published, Fifth Avenue was much transformed. Genteel houses along Lower Fifth Avenue—from Washington Square to Thirty-fourth Street—had been removed for factories and office towers. But once above Thirty-fourth Street, the *Guide* noted,

Fifth Avenue “abruptly emerges from a street of buildings housing wholesale clothing, textile, and bric-a-brac concerns to become the aristocrat of shopping thoroughfares.”<sup>23</sup> It was still the most financially and culturally valuable commercial and residential land on the island. For those who argued that Fifth Avenue should remain residential, the Avenue still was home to the elite of New York even if they were now lifted a hundred feet in the air, perched over Central Park. If the “encroachments of commerce”<sup>24</sup> had effectively amputated Fifth Avenue in the middle, at least its upper reaches retained the key elements of what made the Avenue unique.

#### “A COMPELLING FORCE”: THE SPECULATIVE MARKET IN SPACE

In February 1920, New York was hit with a debilitating snowstorm. Although nothing like the Great Blizzard of 1888, the storm nonetheless knocked down telephone wires, stalled traffic for days, and slowed business to a halt. But in the *RERBG*, the storm barely deserved mention. Facing full-page public notices by New York Telephone (urging New Yorkers to avoid using the few remaining lines open in the city except for emergencies) were statistics showing that 1919 had turned into a banner year for the real estate world. The *RERBG* noted a record for one day’s trading—over \$10 million contracted by Frederick Brown—and estimated that 1919 valuations for property were increasing over the previous year on the order of 30 to 40 percent.<sup>25</sup> The trade and development of Manhattan’s most tangible, material product had become, paradoxically, invisible and weightless.

The inability of Nature’s weapons to injure or even appreciably slow the postwar real estate boom attests to the power of the real estate market in New York. As David Scobey has argued, the New York real estate industry did not explode in the post-Civil War era to serve and facilitate the growth of New York’s manufacturing and finance might. The trade in space was, in and of itself, a powerful generator of New York’s wealth. The most influential and wealthy families in New York—the Astors, the Belmonts, the Vanderbilts—acquired much of their profits from holding and trading land on Manhattan Island.<sup>26</sup>

And yet, the paper transactions—the conveyances that increasingly filled the heavy ledger books in the new Hall of Records on Chambers Street and expanded the pages of the *RERBG* with ever-smaller type—did create architectural forms on the land. The translation of paper into substance was never smooth; the physical form of the city was never a mirror, simply and accurately reflecting the trade in space. Indeed, it was this conversion of commerce into tangible buildings that New Yorkers interpreted

with increasing wonder and confusion. A writer for the *RERBG*, explaining the transformation of Fifth Avenue, noted that “the compelling force is the same which about the year 1845 cleared away the shanties from the ragged edges of the common, smoothed over the potter’s field, and built these old dwellings and stores, whose turn it is now to go.”<sup>27</sup>

Observers of Manhattan’s transformation spoke inaccurately of some vague, invisible force that was responsible for the “march uptown,” and the waves of development that continued to sweep away old buildings, good and bad. The spectacular and, to some, catastrophic transformation of Manhattan was attributed to an inexplicable force. In his 1932 essay about 1920s New York, “My Lost City,” F. Scott Fitzgerald noted that many of the iconographic sites in Manhattan “had somehow disappeared.”<sup>28</sup> The sense of mystery in real estate development had become one of the central elements of Manhattan’s folklore of growth. In fact, few accurately understood the process of land development in New York any better than the writer for the *RERBG*; for most it was a strange and awe-inspiring process. Observers who charted the rise in real estate values and watched old brownstones fall, marble mansions spring up and fall again, and office towers and apartment buildings take over could do little better than attribute the creative destruction along Fifth Avenue to a “compelling force”—a force attractive but also elusive and incomprehensible, and, some would suggest, uncontrollable.

Fifth Avenue’s “restless renewals” must be understood within the larger context of New York’s rise as the “capital of capitalism.”<sup>29</sup> The tremendous demands for space were not simply due to New York’s position as the greatest center for manufacturing in America; it had also become the “front office” for America’s industrial giants and the country’s biggest market for many goods. New York was thus unique in its leadership in industrial management, production, and consumption. It was this role, as the “principal command post of industrial capitalism in the United States,” that urged on the cycles of private destruction and rebuilding.<sup>30</sup>

This combination of economic factors made for an incredibly diverse range of land uses. Elite residence areas bordered on the dense acres of the laboring classes, while manufacturing lofts spread quickly through Lower Manhattan, filling increasingly larger and taller buildings. The “compelling force” behind the rapid and continuous rebuilding of the island came from factors in part unique to New York. First, the growth rate of New York’s population was unmatched anywhere in the nation. Ellis Island was admitting up to one million people a year, one-third of whom chose to stay, at least for a time, in New York. Thus, the city grew steadily denser, especially in Lower Manhattan residential areas, such as the Lower East Side, that were within walking distance of workplaces.<sup>31</sup> In 1910 Manhattan had an average density of 166

people per acre, but the Lower East Side averaged 727.9 people per acre—with some areas exceeding 1,000 people per acre.<sup>32</sup>

Second, the unique configuration of New York's economy—as the center of fashion and consumption—made New York fertile economic soil not for large-scale manufacturing enterprises but rather for an incredible diversity of small manufacturing enterprises.<sup>33</sup> New York's was a relatively unstable marketplace, with businesses opening and closing, rapidly expanding and contracting; few industries with apparent permanence demanded homes like Ford had created at his River Rouge plant. To meet the proliferating desires of shoppers, New York manufacturers developed endless small factories and satellite sweatshops that could change styles with ease. This is what drove the explosion of lofts, the small factory enterprises located in Lower Manhattan and increasingly in midtown. Lofts had first expanded in the waterfront areas and up along the center of the island beginning in the 1850s—in part because of the invention of cast iron, which allowed for multistory buildings with large interior open spaces.<sup>34</sup> A series of factors pushed lofts onto Fifth Avenue and further northward. First, the garment industry followed the garment fashion center. Where the stores went, the garment factories followed. But while these exclusive stores needed the relatively close presence of the garment manufacturers—for designs and alterations—they also wanted to be distant from them. A game of leapfrog took place between department stores and their wholesalers and manufacturers.<sup>35</sup> Lofts dominated the development of manufacturing space in Lower Manhattan and became the archenemy, as we shall see, of Fifth Avenue inhabitants and some commercial owners. A post-World War I boom generated fifty to sixty million square feet in industrial loft space in the 1920s. Furthermore, rather than expanding outward across relatively undeveloped land (as was happening in Brooklyn), industrial buildings grew taller and wider, necessitating the demolition of previous loft structures. Thus on the West Side, where once hundreds of small merchants and factories crowded near the Hudson River, now a few large printing firms were housed in taller and larger buildings. Industrial lofts were soon eclipsed in importance by the growth of corporate headquarters, housed in skyscrapers that would come to dominate the image of New York.<sup>36</sup>

The growth of manufacturing and commerce drove a segregation within Manhattan, whereby downtown and, increasingly, midtown Manhattan was becoming dominated by business. A notice in the *RERBG*, advertising the sale of the Astor midtown properties, declared that “New York, compared to other cities, is like a boy of 18. The characteristics and features of its manhood are now discernible. The Heart of This Great City Is Now Settled for All Time. It is the district from 34th to 59th Sts., 3rd to 10th Avenues.”<sup>37</sup> Although this process had begun much earlier in

the nineteenth century, the combination of manufacturing and commerce expanded dramatically at the end of the century. Culminating in the 1916 Zoning Resolution, private developers and city government worked in tandem to segregate Manhattan by functions. This process—well-known to urban historians—accelerated the settlement of Upper Manhattan and then its redevelopment with ever-denser housing, and the destruction and rebuilding of Lower Manhattan's residential areas to make way for lofts and, later, office skyscrapers. While the Lower East Side, near the heart of Manhattan's industrial center, remained a primary residence for the poorest of workers, its popularity steadily declined, from 540,000 in 1910 to under 250,000 in 1920.<sup>38</sup> Those who could soon began to flee up the avenues to the Upper West and East Sides, and out to the boroughs of the Bronx, Queens, and Brooklyn. Real estate developers made the building of housing a primary activity: erecting rows of brownstones and apartments on the Upper East and West Sides, and large tracts of housing in the outer boroughs for those workers who could afford to commute on the new subways to work.

The result was a market for land that was incredibly destructive, and profitable in that destruction. Indeed, New York's private real estate industry was built and depended on the cyclical rebuilding of the city's physical fabric, making it increasingly dense and centered around business. Manhattan was in a constant state of “improvement”—as the *RERBG* liked to call all new building activities. Property values increased so much because private developers never stopped remaking the landscape of the city. With people and wealth flowing into the city, developers found clients for repeated demolition and construction of newer, taller lofts, offices, and, especially after 1920, apartment houses. There seemed to be no end to the need for greater density, both for homes and businesses.

The story told in this way makes almost too much sense out of an extremely chaotic process of city development. We risk buying into the boosters' ploys when we speak of the “inevitable” growth of Manhattan, the “waves” of development, and so forth.<sup>39</sup> This simple narrative of growth excludes important elements. As David Scobey notes about an earlier, but equally robust, period of Manhattan's growth, the city's development was anything but orderly.<sup>40</sup> More important, the chaos of that growth, its booms and busts and simultaneous over- and underdevelopment, was not youthful disruption but essential to the process of capitalist urbanization. Recognizing the chaotic nature of real estate development is crucial to understanding the creative destruction along Fifth Avenue and the efforts to shape and resist its transformation.

First, while it is generally fair to speak of Manhattan's incredible growth in real estate values and land development, the city's real estate economy was highly sensitive

to economic booms and busts. Thus as the century opened, the *RERBG* painted a bleak picture of real estate in New York City, reporting that the market was dead—with transactions half the number of a year before.<sup>41</sup> But by the end of the decade, building construction and transactions had exploded, making 1909 the best year in the history of the city. The number of planned buildings had expanded from 659, amounting to \$85 million in investments, in 1908 to 995, costing more than \$131 million.<sup>42</sup> The market took a dramatic dive during World War I but immediately rebounded at the war's conclusion. The 1920s brought another boom—especially in the building of apartment houses and skyscrapers to handle the pent-up demand from the war. But even as one area was booming, others could stall in a state of “underdevelopment.” The Upper West Side, long championed by the *RERBG*, only expanded rapidly in the second decade of the twentieth century as the Broadway line was built and restrictive covenants (discussed in greater detail later) ended.<sup>43</sup>

Just as rapidly as property values could increase—doubling every year in some places—so too could they drop like stones. John Flavel Mines, while repeating the usual awestruck tropes about Manhattan's miraculous growth, also noted the catastrophic speculative crashes that occurred in Harlem and elsewhere. In their excitement over the arrival of the Harlem train line, realtors paid up to \$1,000 per lot, only to find them worth only \$9 per lot two years later.<sup>44</sup> Although the *RERBG* constantly warned its readers about the dangers of overdevelopment—for example, during the loft construction craze of the 1910—few heeded this advice.<sup>45</sup>

Beyond the chaos of the market, its propensity toward underdevelopment and overproduction, were inexplicable developments that confounded the simplistic descriptions of New York's miraculous, “inevitable” growth. Edward Pratt, an important advocate for city planning and especially the removal of manufacturing from Manhattan, wondered how manufacturers were “able to thrive in the centre of New York City, where land values are so excessive, and where rentals and insurance charges are proportionately high.”<sup>46</sup> To Pratt their success remained a mystery, even after he interviewed hundreds of manufacturers in the city.

Their “mysterious” success was due to the same “compelling force” that confounded other observers—even the experts of the *RERBG*. The agglomeration economies—what economists call those benefits that come from being in close communication with others in the same industry, including suppliers, consumers, inventors—offers only a partial explanation. Equally important was the “almost indefinable and sometimes even fanciful advantage, the proximity of the New York market.”<sup>47</sup> What Pratt only barely alluded to but remained at the heart of New York's allure was the prestige and social esteem that came with having a store or office in Manhattan. The sources of a place's allure are as much in “illogic” as in rational economic calcu-

lation. As Elizabeth Blackmar has written, “Real estate investment is an enterprise that builds on omens and prophecy,” a social and cultural phenomenon as much as an economic one.<sup>48</sup> And if there was an area that was most beset by the intangible cultural valuations of space that were so important to the creative destruction of New York City, it was Fifth Avenue. For even as Fifth Avenue represented the extremes of the processes affecting Manhattan more generally—the rise of manufacturing and offices below Fifty-ninth Street, the gradual segmentation of the island, the fitful development of land—it also exemplified how fashion and cultural valuing could dictate the focus, rate, and form of creative destruction.

It was the effects of the mysterious, “compelling force” of real estate development that elites of Fifth Avenue in the first decades of the twentieth century tried to understand and control. This force had produced untold wealth and beautiful buildings, and spurred the development of Manhattan Island. And yet this same force had also destroyed historic homes and the fabric of a residential neighborhood and its tightly connected society. John Flavel Mines, who combined his boosterism with a powerful nostalgia for “old New York,” approvingly noted in 1890 the views of a farmer who refused to sell his land in Upper Manhattan because of his faith in its stability:

I like the land. It's always there. It's been there these eighty-seven years, right before my eyes, while the money comes and goes, and I don't know where it is. The land can't run away. . . .<sup>49</sup>

In fact, in Manhattan, and along Fifth Avenue, this was no longer true. The “bit of earth” had become a commodity, as smoothly bought and sold as any other commodity. Its apparent solidity—people spoke of acquiring “a piece of the rock”—had melted into thin air. It was against this notion that land, buildings, and neighborhoods were merely assemblages of rentable, speculative space—no more meaningful than bushels of wheat or heads of cattle—that the residents and businesspeople of Fifth Avenue organized. The stories they told themselves about change along Fifth Avenue shaped their program for “conserving” the Avenue.

But first they would have to make sense of the forces behind the Avenue's “restless renewals.”

#### REAL ESTATE STORIES

The relentless trade in the market for space prompted a giddy euphoria among observers of the city's growth. Recalling, measuring, and evaluating the phenomenon of real estate development became a cottage industry in its own right. Not unlike Holland's infamous tulip mania in the seventeenth century, New Yorkers were gripped by

a real estate speculative fever and observers watched in amazement. Writers of guidebooks and histories, and commentators in the *RERBG*, all sifted tirelessly through the data on the miraculous developments along Fifth Avenue. No one, including readers, seemed to tire of the game. Articles with titles such as "The Bixby Fortune: A Romance of Land Values in New York City" were regular features of daily newspapers and trade magazines, in part because the events they described were so common.<sup>50</sup>

In telling the stories of real estate development in New York, civic boosters—especially in the architectural and real estate press—became historians of a sort: they applied their visions of future development onto the past, building an invented history for Manhattan's rapid but steady, prosperous, and profitable growth. John Flavel Mines offered a rousing celebration of the work of real estate developers in 1890, finding in the statistics of real estate values evidence of their heroic work and the potential dangers they faced:

There are those who object to dry statistics, and say there is no poetry in figures. I maintain that the man who says there is no romance in the vagaries of arithmetic does not know what he is talking about. Is there no poetry in the statistics of Thermopylae, whose three hundred men kept three hundred thousand at bay until the homes of Sparta were safe? Is there no romance in the record of the three score minute-men of Lexington who, in defiance of the rules of arithmetic, stood up against twelve times their number? . . . So, running through the dry statistics of annual assessments just quoted, there is a suggestion to gray-haired men of business who are still among us of a wild speculation in Harlem real estate which created millionaires of a day to make them paupers on the morrow.<sup>51</sup>

The reference point for city builders' achievements remained, as it had since New York's boom had begun a half century earlier, the original real estate transaction, and first real estate jackpot, on Manhattan Island: the sale of the island to Peter Minuit by a group of Delaware Indians in 1626 for twenty-four dollars in trinkets.<sup>52</sup> This event grew in mythical importance in the minds of New Yorkers as they yearly amplified the ludicrousness of the deal. With the 1626 "trade" as the birth date of New York City, the ever-increasing value of land, which by the end of the century and beginning of the new was approaching unimaginable sums, seemed to redeem that history. As Mines enthused, "It would have surpassed the wildest imagination of those worthy men if they could have looked forward to our times and have seen the assessed valuation of the real estate on this island of eleven thousand Dutch *morgens*. . ."<sup>53</sup> Estimating the value of the land of Manhattan Island became something of a public parlor game. For example, Edward Ewing Pratt, who studied the "causes of congestion"

in New York with a sense of awe and frustration, noted in 1910 that "Manhattan has become the most valuable piece of the world's surface. Its value is reckoned at \$3,123,925,788."<sup>54</sup> Developers and New York boosters relished the inflation of property values, using that "first," most stupendous real estate deal as the justification for and the barometer of New York's real estate market.

As the exemplar of New York's growth, Fifth Avenue attracted hyperbolic commentary as rapidly as the city attracted wealth and population. Louise Frances Reynolds, in a history and guidebook to the Avenue published in 1916, declared that Fifth Avenue was simply the "most magnificent street in the world . . . the Via Appia of Opulence."<sup>55</sup> On the hundredth anniversary of the Avenue in 1924, William Pedrick stated simply: "Building activity in the Fifth Avenue section is one of the seven wonders of twentieth century commerce."<sup>56</sup>

If the story of Fifth Avenue's development can be distilled to two or three paragraphs, it is not because there was a dearth of narrative variations on the theme. Fifth Avenue's stunning development occupied the rhetorical gifts of numerous writers, from novelists to popular magazine editors and real estate analysts. Although perhaps the most famous and eloquent of tour guides, Henry James was but one of many to offer comments on architecture, morality, New York's stature, and America's destiny based on a walk up Fifth Avenue. As the backbone of New York, the largest and most powerful city in the country, as the home to America's wealthiest families, and as the setting for the most expensive stores in a burgeoning consumer culture, Fifth Avenue was for many observers a barometer of American progress. Fifth Avenue was known, and in some ways belonged, to the whole nation.

Each "tour" offers a different interpretation of the same set of buildings and the same process of city building. These tours are history stories and sources: they give us hints about the process of capitalist real estate development, and, at the same time, offer insight into the cultural symbolism of Fifth Avenue. If we look closely at how writers in tourist guidebooks, architectural journals, newspapers, and novels interpreted what they saw on Fifth Avenue over the course of the last decade of the nineteenth and first several decades of the twentieth centuries, we will gain an impression of the variety of stories people told themselves about urban transformation.

J. F. L. Collins published a guide for tourists taking a popular bus tour up the Avenue. Similar to the maps of Hollywood today that guide tourists to the homes of celebrities, Collins's guide highlights the great mansions, clubs, and hotels of the wealthy that had ensconced themselves on the Avenue. At ten cents per seat, the bus tour was aimed not at the readers of *Harper's*, where Henry James's rarefied critique of New York was serialized, but to more middling visitors to the city. Collins's

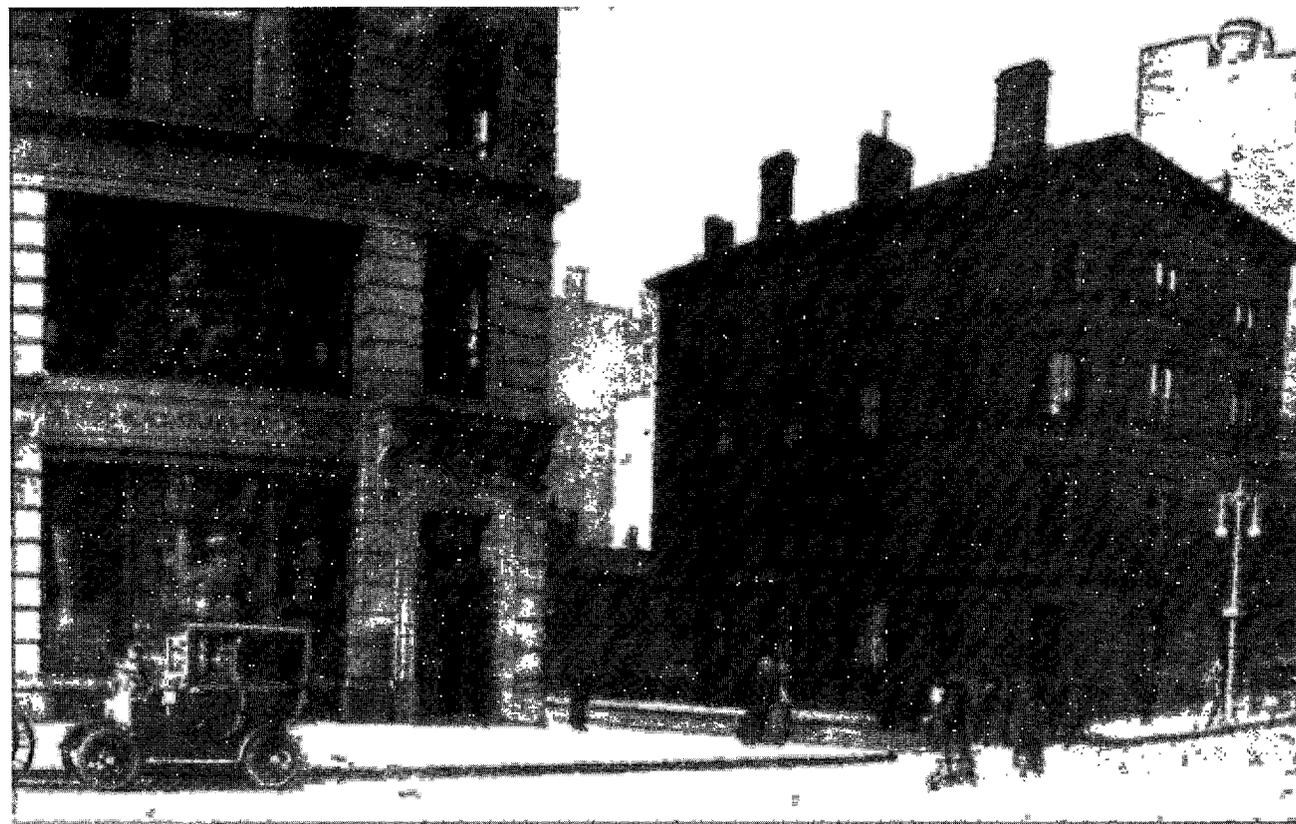


Fig. 2.5. From J. F. L. Collins, *Both Sides of Fifth Avenue* (New York: J. F. L. Collins, 1910). In Collins's tourist guide of the Avenue—not unlike Hollywood's celebrity driving tours of today—the photographs are at odds with the text. The photographs reveal the uneven development of the Avenue, the socially uncomfortable mixing of lofts and brownstones, mansions and apartment towers. © Collection of The New York Historical Society.

tour—with accompanying photographs of the important homes and institutions—appealed to and perpetuated the mythology of Fifth Avenue that brought visitors to Fifth Avenue in the first place (figure 2.5). “You need only say, ‘Fifth Avenue,’” declared Collins:

New York is understood, and this is true whether you say it to the miner in Alaska, the alfalfa grower in the Great Southwest, or the farmer in Pennsylvania. There are many cities having streets called Fifth Avenue. There is but one Fifth Avenue. Fifth Avenue with its millionaire's row; Fifth Avenue with its multi-million-dollar residences; Fifth Avenue with its magnificent clubs; Fifth Avenue with its luxurious shops; the most luxurious in the new world, perhaps in all the world.<sup>57</sup>

For Collins, the rapidity of the change—with new wealth replacing old wealth, marble mansions replacing brownstones—was to be viewed with proud awe, as evidence of not only New York's but the nation's prosperity.



But even as Collins's guide celebrated the Avenue, the photographs reveal something else. Tourists who boarded the Fifth Avenue bus at Washington Square might immediately have been struck by the sad condition of many of the old redbrick townhouses leading to Fourteenth Street, largely overshadowed by nearby loft buildings—such as the Asch Building, which housed, in its top three floors, the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. Though Collins noted that the square had for years “served the purpose of separating the abodes of fashion and the prosperity from the slums to the southward,” the visitor could not help but notice that the Italian and Jewish immigrants who had once lived “southward” now filled the streets during their lunch breaks from the nearby manufacturing lofts around the square and along the Avenue. Collins's guide was silent as the bus drove between Fourteenth and Twenty-third streets, home to the greatest concentration of these loft buildings. The photographs he offered were tightly cropped to show only the Union Club, or the home of Henry Frick. But solid brownstone homes were being superseded by twelve-story

office buildings, and vacant lots pockmarked the Avenue even in the most prestigious blocks, which Collins called "one of the costliest portions of the earth's crust."<sup>58</sup> These question marks in the landscape were brushed over by Collins; they did not match the narrative related in the text of his guidebook. The story remained one of miraculous, steady growth, a model of what capitalist urban development could create:

Possibly no street in any city of the world has been so expensively built as this Avenue between Fourteenth and Fifty-ninth Streets, which in the lifetime of a single generation has been an unimproved waste, a street of stately homes, and finally a centre of luxurious trade.<sup>59</sup>

Collins's contradictory accounts of Fifth Avenue suggest the complexity of private real estate development in New York and the range of responses it inspired. On the one hand, the mansions and glittering stores of Fifth Avenue expressed the rising cultivation of American arts, as well as the proof of a truly "American" architecture. On the other hand, the history of Fifth Avenue might have suggested a different lesson: that bad development patterns and unsightly buildings had to be combated aggressively with the aid of government regulation in order to protect and preserve the glories of Fifth Avenue.

In Collins's tour, and in so many others, Fifth Avenue was an apparent contradiction of miraculous creativity and terrible destruction. Some saw the process of destruction and rebuilding along the Avenue as the most robust and optimistic example of America's miraculous modernization. The thundering steel mills of Carnegie and the endless miles of Vanderbilt's railroad tracks found a symbolic residence on Fifth Avenue, in the mansions of the monumentally wealthy and the stores where America's wealth was consumed. Celebrants of Fifth Avenue looked on the brownstones, so loved today, as drab reminders of an old, stodgy wealth, "hopelessly pedestrian and dull"; their replacement by the mansions of the new industrialists was heralded as the culmination of American economic enterprise.

Moses King, for example, in his widely read 1893 two-volume guidebook of New York, celebrated Fifth Avenue's stature as "one of the most magnificent thoroughfares of the world."<sup>60</sup> He presented a quick tour of the Avenue, citing in rapid succession the mansions of the "Old New-York families" below Fourteenth Street, the new businesses along the Avenue between Twenty-third and Forty-second Streets, and the "palaces of some of New York's millionaires" above Forty-second Street. King called the Vanderbilt houses, located just below Central Park, the "finest examples of domestic architecture in the United States."<sup>61</sup> Boosters saw American prosperity repre-

sented in Fifth Avenue, which, according to Burton Hendrick, had "lost its old New York character":

It has been said that Wall Street is the pulse of the national life. Not more so than Fifth Avenue. To its upbuilding the whole nation has made tribute. . . its importance has broadened, and its national character increased. . . The avenue has thus become cosmopolitan; has, to a considerable extent, lost its old New York character, has dedicated itself not to a single city or a single state, but to the country at large.<sup>62</sup>

For many of the period, Fifth Avenue was an unblemished record of American economic and social progress, an indication of the heights of cultivation and wealth Americans could attain.

However, others, such as Henry James, saw in the marble mansions and baroque ornamentation only crass materialism and in the rapid changes only the "restless renewals" of a morally defunct society. Fifth Avenue was, for James, a dramatic warning about the excesses of modern society in the "age of gold," where the past was sacrificed for a more profitable but equally transitory present. The Avenue, and the city as a whole, had become, according to James, a "monster of the mere market."<sup>63</sup> In his tour up Fifth Avenue, after an angry visit to his now-demolished childhood home, James had few kind words for the wealth displayed in stone along the Avenue. His tour had a didactic purpose: to offer evidence in brick and mortar of the moral decay of New York and of American society more generally. What truly infuriated him about Fifth Avenue was the orgy of change that gripped the nouveau riche of Fifth Avenue. James considered the process by which the houses of his youth were ripped down in favor of mansions for the wealthy to be the ultimate symbol of a destructive spirit at the heart of America. The endless building up and tearing down left nothing but raw symbols of greed in their wake, gargantuan estates covered in gold "inches thick" but impermanent and transient as the rest of the "monstrous" buildings of the city.<sup>64</sup> Where once he saw in the architecture of New York a possibility of a sense of permanence, in 1904 he felt only the "dreadful chill of change."<sup>65</sup>

Representatives of the real estate and architectural industries struck an ambivalent tone in their repeated surveys of "new Fifth Avenue," which they narrated in the pages of the *RERBG*, the *Architectural Record*, and other journals. For these writers as well, Fifth Avenue was a barometer of the state of real estate in the city and the condition of architecture in the nation as a whole. They expressed their incredulity about the stunning growth in real estate values and the lightning speed with which property changed hands and buildings were torn down and built up. But they also praised the outdoor museum of architecture that Fifth Avenue had become, a virtual exhibition

hall for America's most influential architects—Carrere and Hastings; McKim, Mead and White; Ralph Adams Cram. They applauded the removal of the “dull, monotonous, high-stoop brownstone houses” and welcomed the possibility of a truly American architecture.<sup>66</sup>

But unlike King and other boosters, the architectural and real estate professions were less sanguine about the changes they saw. These critics proffered a strong dose of skepticism about what the dramatic destruction and rebuilding had brought. A. C. David considered the intense creation and destruction along the Avenue to be dangerously chaotic, “somewhat barbaric and decidedly miscellaneous.”<sup>67</sup> However, he noted that a few buildings rose above the base speculative cacophony—the Altman Building, the Knickerbocker Trust Company, McKim's Gorham Building—to “linger in the minds of visitors to New York,” creating a “glorified vision of the thoroughfare, as the most remarkable and interesting business street in this country.”<sup>68</sup> Louise Frances Reynolds, in her 1916 *History of a Great Thoroughfare*, offered readers an interpretation of Fifth Avenue as a symbol of the “rapidity of American growth and the national spirit of progress.” But, just like Collins's bus tour of the Avenue, Reynolds revealed cracks in the armor of a purely glorious Fifth Avenue. She noted the “nightmare” of Lower (below Fourteenth Street) Fifth Avenue—where old mansions were unpleasingly surrounded by manufacturing buildings—and the effects of the “business invasion.”<sup>69</sup>

Burton Hendrick, writing about the “New Fifth Avenue” for *Metropolitan Magazine* in 1905, also found a middle ground between the condemnation of Henry James and the celebrations of King and David. Hendrick marveled at the development along the Avenue: “It is a remarkable evidence of national prosperity. It shows that the jubilant wealth of the country is manifested not only in the stock exchange, in capitalistic combinations and the purchase of foreign steamship lines.” Andrew Carnegie's mansion, built far up Fifth Avenue, encompassed what Hendrick thought best on Fifth Avenue. Carnegie's choice

is symbolic of the present industrial era. It typifies the phenomenal period of commercial success through which the nation is now passing. It is as much a symbol of American commercialism as was the mediaeval palace of the feudal time; or the Greek temple of the age of Athenian beauty and culture. Not the success of race, but the native wit to fight one's way, to grapple with the material problems of this stirring competitive age and to bear away the palm. And this, I take it, is what is expressed in the leading residential street of America.

In essence, Fifth Avenue, when viewed in a positive light, was a symbol not only of great private wealth but of a pioneering spirit. Carnegie's colonizing venture in the

wilds of northern Manhattan was a conquering of the West writ small, a step in the domestication of a distant, “wild” land.

But Hendrick and other critics who seemed to celebrate Fifth Avenue were also skeptical of its future. Hendrick, and New Yorkers more generally, had come to accept that regardless of its beauty or wealth, every building in New York had a limited life expectancy: “All over the Fifth Avenue section in the last seven years, the spirit of destruction has been abroad. The new generation had little respect for the landmarks of the old. As the larger part of the section was already built up, it was necessary to demolish large areas and build anew.”<sup>70</sup>

The sentiment of regret for the physical remnants of the city's past permeated the writings of those who chronicled Fifth Avenue's development. Even if the tone and purpose of these observers differed radically, all at least paused to consider what was being lost as the market employed the wrecking ball. The most exultant real estate booster and the sharpest critic of change in the city were united at least momentarily in their lament before the creatively destructive transformation of their city. James's regret for his demolished homes in New York and Boston are at the heart of his *American Scene*. They mark the moments of his deepest fury at America's materialism and disregard for tradition. On the other end of the spectrum, in the *RERBG*, notices of the passing of old homes to make way for highly profitable lofts and office buildings gave the magazine editors pause. Very few offered as unequivocal a celebration of the transformation of the Avenue as J. F. L. Collins. Some decried the effects of the very same process with equal vigor. Helen Henderson, a twentieth-century flaneur in New York, London, and Paris, perhaps best encompassed the sentimental attitude as she walked through the city and noted the few remaining homes and institutions. When she came across the decrepit boyhood home of Theodore Roosevelt, a few blocks from Fifth Avenue near Gramercy Park, she launched into a diatribe about the city's care for its landmarks:

If Henry James felt the melancholy check and snub to the felicities of his backward reach “in the presence, so to speak, of the rudely, the ruthlessly suppressed birth house” in Washington Square, what are we to suppose must be Mr. Theodore Roosevelt's emotions when he regards that terrible travesty in Twentieth Street, its entire face opened to the vulgar gaze, its discreet brownstone features annihilated by the flagrant burst of plate glass from loft to basement, across which reads the lurid inscription—“Theodore Roosevelt was born in this house.”<sup>71</sup>

What united these writers then was a concern not necessarily for specific buildings but for some sort of permanence and stability amid the change of the city. If Fifth

Avenue inspired a cacophony of voices prophesizing many different futures for the city and nation, it also could speak one clear message: the city was heading forward with astounding and daunting rapidity. It was out of this shock that a number of investors and residents of the Avenue began to develop organized methods of slowing the pace of change and directing it in ways both more aesthetically pleasing and more profitable.

#### PROTECTING PROPERTY

The inhabitants of Fifth Avenue—some of the wealthiest families in America, and certainly some of the most powerful actors in city government and business—responded rapidly in the first two decades of the twentieth century to the spin of destruction and rebuilding that threatened their homes and businesses. The story of Fifth Avenue residents' and business owners' efforts to freeze Fifth Avenue in a certain incarnation—that of an elite residential area and exclusive shopping district—is a study in the rise of intervention in the marketplace of space. In essence, Fifth Avenue inhabitants and investors utilized the most modern methods of city development in order to achieve conservative results. For we find not only one of the first and certainly the most influential example of government zoning but a whole range of tools used to mold, manipulate, and control space. On one end were the private cajoling, the backroom discussions held at the Century and Metropolitan Clubs or at the Fifth Avenue Hotel. At the other end were the government measures of street widening, zoning, and policing. In between were semipublic efforts of the Fifth Avenue Association, the pressure applied by banks and insurance companies, the aesthetic arguments of the press, and private legal measures to restrict the uses of land. The approaches to managing the market for space encompass the variety of Progressive urban reform efforts, from individual moral control to the large-scale planning of the "technocrats."<sup>72</sup> Beginning well before the turn of the century and ranging from the most personal, informal actions to the most public and radical, inhabitants and businesspeople of Fifth Avenue took concerted steps to intervene in the market and to control the development of Fifth Avenue.

While the story is often told of the shift from private efforts to regulate space to state-sponsored means in the early twentieth century, Fifth Avenue's preservation was hardly so simple. Certainly, residents who failed to stop or shape development they thought deleterious to their investments and social life embraced new methods, including ultimately comprehensive zoning ordinances. But the older methods persisted well into the twentieth century, and were used interchangeably with these more formal and legal instruments. Protectors of Fifth Avenue employed a patchwork of methods for shaping physical transformation.

The most basic response of wealthy residents to New York's industrial development was simply to flee from it. The story of Fifth Avenue is to a large degree the story of migration, up the Avenue and then beyond the city. When Andrew Carnegie built his mansion on Fifth Avenue at Ninetieth Street, members of the press scoffed at the inaccessibility of his almost rural site. Burton Hendrick, writing for *Metropolitan Magazine* in 1905, seemed to mock Carnegie for building such a glorious home "only one remove from goatville."

For the most part it was a dreary waste of tenements and the cheapest kind of dwellings. It was the ragged edge of Harlem, and the old-time Harlem shanty had not entirely disappeared. . . . his nearest neighbors were the inhabitants of the small shanties on the opposite side of Ninetieth Street, who persistently clung to their native soil splendidly oblivious of their distinguished surroundings.

He suggested that Carnegie was trying to re-create the Scottish Highlands of his youth, with the city's water reservoir serving as a "a faithful substitute, perhaps, for a Scottish loch."<sup>73</sup>

Carnegie was not alone in leaping far uptown. Mary Mason Jones, Edith Wharton's aunt, had long preceded him with a startling move to Fifth Avenue and Fifty-seventh Street in 1869, where she built her Marble Row of attached mansions. Edith Wharton memorialized her aunt's audacity in the character of Mrs. Manson Mingott in *The Age of Innocence*:

She was sure that presently the hoardings, the quarries, the one-story saloons, the wooden greenhouses in ragged gardens, and the rocks from which goats surveyed the scene, would vanish before the advance of residences as stately as her own—perhaps (for she was an impartial woman) even statelier; and that the cobblestones over which the old clattering omnibuses bumped would be replaced by smooth asphalt, such as people reported having seen in Paris.<sup>74</sup>

These "pioneers" of upper Fifth Avenue were farsighted, for within just a few years most of the lots along Fifth Avenue were purchased for new mansions and even the first apartment buildings. The buyers of these lots in "goatville" were soon joined by their hesitant or stubborn friends downtown.

Those who did not see the future as clearly were faced with regular upheavals as they moved in the face of expanding business development. For example, August Belmont, son of an early park commissioner and the developer of New York's subway system, sold his house near Union Square and moved to midtown, only to flee up to Eighty-first Street a few years later. In 1910, after only sixteen years, Belmont sold this

house too, and it was promptly demolished to make way for an apartment building. The Astors, long one of the most land-wealthy families in New York, also skipped their way up the Avenue, from Washington Square to Thirty-fourth Street to Sixty-fifth and Fifth. Indeed, it was Mrs. William Astor's move to the heart of the "upper" Avenue that started a mass exodus from the lower Avenue.<sup>75</sup> Stories like those of the Astors and Belmont abounded as elites came to recognize that their wealth was an inadequate barrier against the pressures of development.

Nonetheless, in the period from 1880 (when industrial development began to encroach upon Washington Square and lower Fifth Avenue and the first great mansions of upper Fifth Avenue were built) to the late 1920s (when the mansions were rapidly replaced with apartment buildings), elite families engaged in a spirited struggle to secure, once and for all, their exclusive residential area. As the wealthy leaped or crawled up the Avenue, establishing homes at the vanguard of development—to safer residential ground—they began concerted efforts to secure the character of their neighborhood. It was in the context of rapid development below and potential development in Upper Manhattan that elite families made a commitment to stabilize the neighborhood, if only to protect their investments in their grand mansions.

For those who refused to continue moving up Fifth Avenue in the face of "inevitable" development, the first challenge they offered was to simply not sell. Stories of those who have refused to participate in the market, and who have refused to follow the assumption that "everything has a price," are legion in New York lore.<sup>76</sup> For instance, Hurley's steak house refused to succumb to the offers of the Rockefellers; the three-story restaurant remains nestled beside Rockefeller Center. Perhaps the best-known holdout is the store on Herald Square that resisted Macy's bribes, forcing the largest store in the world to build around it.<sup>77</sup> Newspapers in the early years of the century were filled with the stories of old families—often widows living in brownstones—who refused to sell out to department stores and manufacturing firms eager to assemble plots to build their stores and factories. On lower Fifth Avenue and along Washington Square North, a number of older families who managed to hold onto their brownstones—even their redbrick homes of the first half of the century—were treated with bemused respect and humor.

More shocking, especially to the real estate press, was the resistance of established families within the heart of the business district. The Wendells, who lived in a brownstone on the northwest corner of Fifth Avenue at Thirty-ninth Street (just above B. Altman and just below the New York Public Library), held onto their home long past the time when the rest of their neighbors had fled. "The Wendells never sell," Louise Reynolds reported in her 1916 Avenue guide. "In the rear is a yard worth a million



Fig. 2.6. A classic "holdout" on Fifth Avenue, circa 1920. Wendell House, at the northwest corner of Thirty-ninth Street and Fifth Avenue, left, remained a single-family home, even as neighboring brownstones to the north were converted into stores and workshops. Note the advertisement for Knox Hats on the side of the tall building to the right. © Collection of The New York Historical Society.

dollars which was kept it is said to give exercise room for a pet dog."<sup>78</sup> When the family finally did leave, they willed the property to a seminary in New Jersey (figures 2.6 and 2.7).<sup>79</sup> Just a few blocks south, B. Altman slowly assembled lots for his palatial department store, but one family resisted selling. Altman designed the building in a series of modular pieces so that once the family finally sold out, his department store could be completed with hardly a seam to reveal the struggle for space.<sup>80</sup>

Real estate developers in the 1920s and 1930s, determined to assemble large lots to create ever-taller and more massive commercial and office buildings, found them-

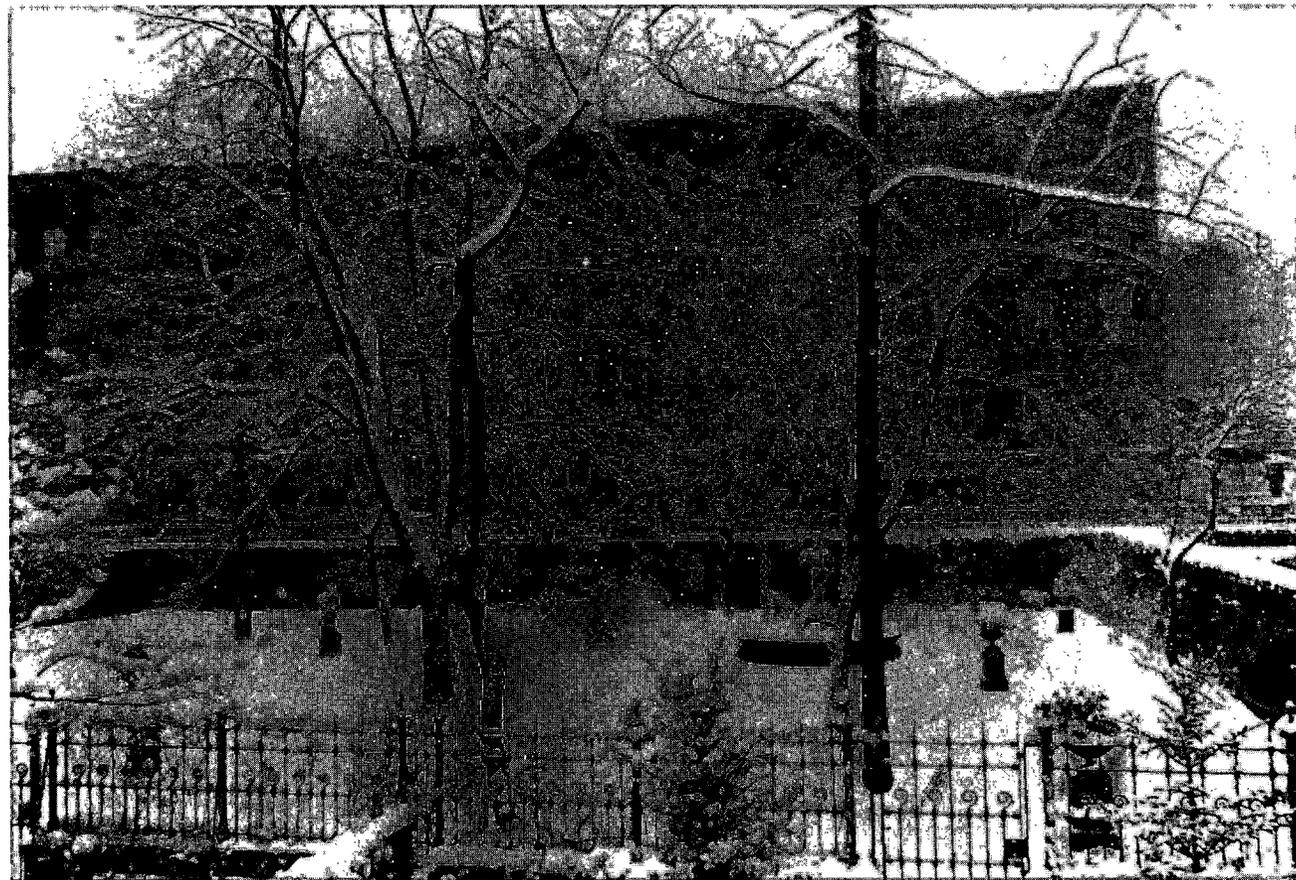


Fig. 2.7. The garden of Wendell House, at Fifth Avenue and Thirty-ninth Street, circa 1900. © Collection of The New-York Historical Society.

selves increasingly confounded by holdouts. In 1930, developer Irwin S. Chanin proposed that legislation be passed to prevent the “heartbreaking” collapse of building efforts when “one person . . . makes impossible an operation which would be a vast improvement economically.”<sup>81</sup> Though New York had embraced zoning in 1916 and a range of new building codes in the 1920s, the “condemnation of property or private improvement” was indeed, as Chanin feared, seen as a “blow to our long-established conception of the sacredness of private property.”<sup>82</sup>

Eventually most did yield to the pressures of encroachments and the enticements of increased property values. The *New York Times* reported in 1920, on the front page no less, that the Burton family had finally convinced a Miss Switzer to sell her home on Fifth Avenue between Thirty-eighth and Thirty-ninth—for nearly one million

dollars. This sale gave the Burtons almost the entire lot, save for the Wendell House on the corner of Thirty-ninth. Switzer, a widow, had not been “in a selling mood.” Perhaps influenced by her neighbors the Wendells, or perhaps wisely waiting for property values to jump even further, she held out until 1920.<sup>83</sup>

Some residents of Fifth Avenue were far more organized in their efforts, combining extensive land purchases with restrictive covenants to secure their neighborhood as an elite residential area. The Vanderbilts, for example, expended enormous amounts of money to retain the land around their several mansions between Fifty-first and Fifty-ninth Streets. The most dramatic example of their commitment to fighting the trend of business development along the Avenue occurred in 1902, when the Catholic Orphan Asylum, occupying the land from Fifty-first to Fifty-second Streets, was sold. After building had begun on an eighteen-story hotel planned for the site, William Kissam Vanderbilt bought the land and built instead what became known as the Marble Twins. Similarly, when the Langham Hotel came on the market, the Vanderbilts purchased it for \$1.325 million and tore it down in order to sell the lot for private residences. Morton Plant was one resident whom the Vanderbilts were able to lure to the Avenue at a relatively late date, in 1902. Plant built a fine home, designed by Richard Morris Hunt, at Fifty-second Street. But from the start, Plant was skeptical: he insisted that the restrictive covenant on the property be limited to twenty-five years. In fact, he barely lasted fifteen years before, in 1916, he sold the property back to the Vanderbilts. In a clear admission of defeat, they leased it to Cartier, the jewelry concern in whose hands it remains today.<sup>84</sup>

The restrictive covenant was applied widely by Fifth Avenue magnates who sought to ensure that their land would remain residential indefinitely. Restrictive covenants, or deed restrictions, were one of the most common legal tools for controlling the use of property, utilized primarily by middle- and upper-class landowners to protect their property and to develop stable residential enclaves.<sup>85</sup> Because covenants usually stayed with the land—the restriction, for example, on building size bound future owners, not just the first to sign the deed—they had a wide appeal.<sup>86</sup> Their popularity throughout the country in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries came from their flexibility: restrictive covenants served the needs of builders of new towns (who used covenants as a form of zoning), small subdivision investors trying to attract wealthy clientele to a new development, and individual owners hoping to limit development around their homes. Indeed, the form of American cities, at least their outlying areas, is largely the product of sophisticated uses of restrictive covenants.<sup>87</sup> In New York, wealthy landowners and developers had long relied on covenants to control the use

of their vast holdings on the island; and residential neighborhood developers utilized them to meet the demand for elite, secure neighborhoods in Lower Manhattan, such as St. John's Park (below Canal Street) and Gramercy Park.<sup>88</sup>

In the twentieth century restrictive covenants continued to be used liberally: well into the second decade of the twentieth century, most of upper Fifth Avenue was covered by restrictions. Aymar Embury, writing in the *Brickbuilder*, suggested that "a large part of it was restricted property, and the balance, because of the restrictions, appeared unlikely to become anything else but residential property."<sup>89</sup> Indeed, so rare were unencumbered plots of land—especially in the most desirable area between Forty-second and Fifty-ninth Streets—that the *New York Times* took note in 1908 of a sign at the corner of Fifty-third and Fifth: "For Sale, Without Restrictions."<sup>90</sup> It was the Vanderbilts, whose homes between Fifty-first and Fifty-ninth Streets demarcated the most fashionable section of Fifth Avenue from the end of the 1800s through the 1910s, who exploited the restrictive covenants to their hilt. William Kissam Vanderbilt, for instance, sold several plots of land he owned around his mansion—Plant's was one of these—with the stipulation that they remain residential for twenty-five years.<sup>91</sup> The real estate and architectural press regularly commented on the Vanderbilts' efforts to stem the tide of development. "That members of the Vanderbilt family have been able to preserve the neighborhood as a residence section," one writer commented, "is the most interesting part of the story."<sup>92</sup>

Rather than creating a cohesive residential neighborhood, however, the restrictive covenants more often than not simply stalled development. For despite their influence, the Vanderbilts were unable to sell their holdings to exclusively residential buyers. With families unwilling to challenge what they saw as the inevitable progression of business concerns along the Avenue, some vacant lots on the most exclusive Avenue in the world found no buyers. For example, A. T. Stewart's mansion at Thirty-fourth and Fifth, and the Paran Stevens plot at Thirty-seventh (later Tiffany's), sat on the market for several years as investors hesitantly counted the speculative possibilities.<sup>93</sup> As J. F. L. Collins guided his readers by the palaces of the wealthy in 1910, he skirted over the fact that even in the most desirable residential areas—at Seventy-second, Seventy-third, Seventy-seventh, and Eighty-first Streets—vacant lots dotted the Avenue.<sup>94</sup> Similarly, the Langham Hotel site lay vacant from 1902 until World War I, when it was sold and an eight-story loft building occupied by a dress factory concern was built, across from Plant's house.<sup>95</sup> The combination of a jewelry store and, even worse, a dress factory must have signaled the death knell for the Vanderbilts' efforts.

The postwar boom was launched in March 1920, when the Astor estate sold 141 parcels of land in Manhattan for over \$5 million, in one of the most successful auc-

tions in the history of the city. The usually sober *RERBG* allowed itself to be caught up in sentimental observance of the passing of an age. The income tax, economic conditions of wartime, and the postwar economic opportunity for development had "brought about the sale of many pieces of land and numerous buildings to the amazement of old New Yorkers, who would have taken an oath that certain well-known estates would remain intact until the end of time."<sup>96</sup> And indeed, there were other signs that the battle had been relinquished. Even before Cartier's arrival, the end of the Vanderbilt stronghold had been foreseen. The *RERBG* reported that the Vanderbilts' agreement to rescind their restrictive covenant on a site at Fifty-second and Fifth Avenue "must mean that they have agreed to abandon their opposition to the transformation of the district."<sup>97</sup> Although the Vanderbilts remained on the Avenue for more than a decade, the symbolic end of the old society arrived in 1924 when the grand mansion at Fifty-eighth and Fifth was torn down.

Few Fifth Avenue families had simply watched as their neighborhood changed. Their answer to the pressure of development was, finally, to join the real estate boom. In recognition of their impotence before real estate development and retail expansion, the families along the Avenue dove wholeheartedly into the development of upper Fifth Avenue, demolishing, selling, auctioning, and developing their plots, all to the awestruck observation of the press. Led by architect James Edwin Ruthven Carpenter, some of the most strident defenders of the mansion neighborhood now saw great profit in apartment buildings along Central Park and brought a lawsuit to overturn legislation restricting building heights there (fixing a weakness of the 1916 Zoning Resolution that had effectively allowed for the tallest of all buildings to be built opposite open space).<sup>98</sup> The legislation was overturned in 1924, fueling an almost instantaneous demolition spree, which brought down no less than twenty-six mansions above Fifty-ninth Street, most of which were replaced by apartment buildings.<sup>99</sup> For all the incredulity, New York's developers and architects were poised to take advantage of a new real estate boom and legal rulings—as well as a cultural acceptance of apartment living. As Elizabeth Hawes has argued, apartments became more attractive as the costs of maintaining a private house and the required servants escalated, country houses fulfilled the desire for private open space, and growing public forms of entertainment replaced the need for private ballrooms and massive dining rooms.<sup>100</sup>

The 1920s were simply a continuation of the building boom that had begun in the prewar years. In 1925 alone, fifty-three new buildings were completed on the Upper East Side and fifty-four were in progress. Architects like Carpenter, and McKim, Mead and White; real estate brokers like Douglas Elliman; and new developers like the upstart Benjamin Winter were ready and eager to exploit the possibil-

ities of Fifth Avenue and the neighboring, and up-and-coming, Park Avenue.<sup>101</sup> In 1916, Carpenter himself had given a running start to the transformation of upper Fifth Avenue with his apartment building at 906 Fifth Avenue, which marked the first time a mansion was replaced by an apartment block. The lamentations for the noble past of Fifth Avenue on the editorial page of the *RERBG* were matched by reports of developers and architects eager to transform the Avenue.

The story of Fifth Avenue is clearly not simply one of a "march uptown" of the wealthy, of the laying out of permanent neighborhoods where tourists would come to gaze at America's wealth. Rather, incredibly destabilizing changes took place that even the wealthiest and most powerful families in America could not slow. The Vanderbilts, whose railroad lines had laid the foundations for western expansion, were virtually impotent before the attraction of profit in space that the land along Fifth Avenue offered. In the end, even the Vanderbilts could not hide from, nor could they prevent, the pressure of commercial expansion. Retail stores as well as hotels and offices crowded up the Avenue, taking over older homes and replacing them quickly with denser developments. While restrictive covenants could serve as the first of the modern tools of city planning, for the wealthy of Fifth Avenue they were a conservative strategy when only radical measures could succeed. Restrictive covenants were no longer powerful enough for the Vanderbilts, Astors, and Belmonts to achieve the spatial security they once enjoyed. In the end, the victor was the marketplace itself, the "compelling force" that few could accurately explain and fewer could control.

Nevertheless, if individual residents along Fifth Avenue could do little to stop development, a union of politically influential commercial investors and retailers could challenge the "compelling force." The robust real estate market, which threatened to coerce a retreat of all the elite homes and businesses, was finally shaped and stemmed by concerted political organization and advocacy. The lawsuits challenging height limitations had already indicated that, at least by the 1920s, some of Fifth Avenue's old families had learned more modern techniques of land control. But it was the retailers of Fifth Avenue who led the movement for shaping development along Fifth Avenue in a new direction—away from flight, restrictive covenants, and land acquisition and toward the new field of city planning. Just like the older residents, their goal was preservation of the unique characteristics of the Avenue. But they now defined those characteristics differently: they saw Fifth Avenue not as "Millionaire's Mile" but as America's Bond Street, the country's finest shopping boulevard.

What led to this new attitude toward the Avenue? What ideas animated the move toward insisting on uniform regulation of use and form along an avenue that had long

been considered the forefront of Manhattan's celebrated private growth, a symbol of the force and prosperity inherent in unimpeded capitalist enterprise? Central to the effort was the creation of a new image of the Avenue, which portrayed it as an essential element in the economic health of the city. The link was explicitly made by Fifth Avenue's boosters between its physical appearance and desirability and its value to New York City's economy.

It was out of this extensive public discussion and image-making that the Fifth Avenue Association (FAA) articulated its message for "preserving" the Avenue and developed new methods for regulating space. The FAA translated the varied responses to Fifth Avenue's rapid transformation into public and private real estate intervention to mold and resist the changes along the Avenue. But a crucial shift was necessary: defenders of Fifth Avenue needed to persuade the city that Fifth Avenue required public intervention. They did so by constructing a new narrative of the Avenue's past and projected future that contributed to its prestige and economic value.

#### COMMERCE WITHOUT COMMERCIALISM: THE FIFTH AVENUE ASSOCIATION AND THE "CONSERVATION" OF THE AVENUE

William J. Pedrick of the FAA concluded his 1927 evaluation of "Fifth Avenue Today" by declaring the "sober truth" that "all things are in flux."<sup>102</sup> His dedication to the wisdom of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus notwithstanding, the opposite was in fact true. It had been the goal of the FAA since its founding in 1907 to ensure that all things, at least on Fifth Avenue, not be in flux. To do so, the association undertook an enormous range of activities, including legislative advocacy, policing the streets, awarding architectural honors, and placing traffic lights. It was instrumental in passing the 1916 Zoning Resolution, the first comprehensive zoning ordinance in America. The work of the FAA was aimed at solidifying Fifth Avenue in its present form as an elite residential and commercial area.

The Fifth Avenue Association was founded in April 1907 by a small group of property owners, residents, and retailers with the motto "to conserve at all times the highest and best interests of the Fifth Avenue section."<sup>103</sup> Always a voluntary organization, the FAA grew from a founding membership of 37 to 500 just three years later (in 1910) and reached membership as high as 1,000 in the 1950s.<sup>104</sup> While seemingly a simple property owners association organized to preserve the value of real estate investments, in fact a surprising number of the FAA members did not own property on Fifth Avenue.<sup>105</sup> In addition to real estate magnates Douglas and Lawrence Elliman,

FAA founding members included Rolan Knoedler, an art dealer; William Knabe, a maker of pianos; Simon Brentano, the publisher; and William Mitchell Kendall of the McKim, Mead and White architecture firm.<sup>106</sup> The actions of the FAA were motivated as much by enhancing the allure of the street for shoppers and retailers as to boosting property values for speculative investors.

The central idea behind the FAA's advocacy was to retain an exclusive retail and residential area, where immigrants would be scarce and beggars absent, where the more flamboyant popular culture growing on Broadway would be held in check, and where a genteel, controlled commercial culture would hold sway. Assimilation might have been the goal of some Progressives, and New York might have been known within the general culture increasingly as the place where cultures and peoples melded, but on Fifth Avenue the goal was always segregation and exclusion.

What made Fifth Avenue special—and eminently necessary to “conserve”—was that it remained somehow “uncommercial” even as it represented the pinnacle of the commercial culture. It represented a different idea of commerce, one that catered to a limited and exclusive clientele—as opposed to the bustling and diverse commerce of neighboring Broadway, where gaudy signs and lures of all types drew a heterogeneous mix of classes. Broadway and its entertainment arena at Times Square was based on a high quantity of business, but Fifth Avenue's elites preferred to seek out “quality.” While Broadway and other commercial streets had become besieged with advertising, traffic, and the chaotic bustle of volume business, Fifth Avenue remained relatively serene. The Fifth Avenue Commission in 1912 stated the case clearly:

If, however, our indifference to its appearance continues, we may expect that Fifth Avenue will cease to retain even its present commercial prominence but will become another and cheaper Broadway, with a garish electric sign display and other undesirable accompaniments.<sup>107</sup>

So, even as Fifth Avenue became the resting place of the most revered and expensive of the commercial culture's product, it somehow stood above it, thus adding to its allure. It was this delicate image that was threatened at the turn of the century, thus spurring the FAA reforms.

The FAA would not be the agent of some foreign, radical new future, but instead a logical instrument to strengthen and enhance the existing structure of the Avenue. Although the FAA would author some of the most far-reaching and momentous changes in urban land use controls, it never advertised its work in that way. Its goal, exemplified by its own historical narrative, was to freeze Fifth Avenue in a particular moment of economic organization. Ironically, then, Fifth Avenue would lead the eco-

nomie prosperity of the city by moving in the opposite direction, away from unregulated loft and office development. Fifth Avenue's property values would be maintained now by regulating what was built and sold there.

The FAA succeeded where so many powerful individuals had failed. It managed to prevent the influx of manufacturing firms and stabilized the Avenue from Forty-second to Ninetieth Streets as the most valuable residential and commercial property in the city. To this day, Fifth Avenue in this stretch is the most expensive retail land in the world.<sup>108</sup> While remaining a private organization, the FAA was the primary motivating force behind some of the most important changes in civic land use and planning in the twentieth century: zoning to separate economic activities and land-use controls to shape the physical appearance of the city. While the 1916 Zoning Resolution remains the FAA's single most important accomplishment, its other semipublic activities at regulating the land along Fifth Avenue have equal relevance to cities today. As one of the first modern business improvement districts, it anticipated what has become a national trend: the private development and regulation of neighborhoods and even whole towns. Today, business improvement districts (BIDs) and private towns with elaborate aesthetic and land-use controls are increasingly the dominant forces in shaping manufactured and even natural landscapes.<sup>109</sup>

How was a private, voluntary organization able to gain such influence over the design and regulation of a district's development? First, the FAA built on the long-standing efforts of local owners and retailers to stem the change along the Avenue. But it did so in the only way possible—through concerted, unified action. The private efforts of the Vanderbilts, as we have seen, could only have limited effects, despite huge financial investments. Second, the FAA's unified effort was effective because it involved the city in regulating the Avenue's appearance and activities. Although it perpetuated an image of Fifth Avenue as the “natural” product of capitalist enterprise, the FAA skillfully utilized—and indeed supported—the expansion of municipal authority over the landscape. City intervention—through street widening, zoning laws, and policing—was essential to the successful “preservation” of Fifth Avenue as an elite neighborhood. Finally, the FAA managed to shape the understanding of Fifth Avenue's past development and thus powerfully influenced its future growth. The FAA was the most important recaller and inventor of Fifth Avenue's history, and hence did the most to secure Fifth Avenue's reputation as the premier address in the city and, perhaps, the world. In a process of capitalist urbanization where value of space was as much the product of cultural image as locational advantage, the FAA wrote the self-fulfilling prophecies of profit.

The FAA most powerfully shaped the narrative that would be used to justify new

forms of regulation of urban space. For so many, telling the stories of Fifth Avenue—its rise, its morality, the social life of its inhabitants, its transformation—served important purposes, from evaluating the state of the city and nation to spurring investment and elevating property values. City builders of all types—city officials, real estate moguls, department store magnates—could all benefit from the touch of Fifth Avenue's magic.

Nevertheless, while a range of actors found reasons to relate the glorious history of Fifth Avenue, it was the Fifth Avenue Association that did the most to enshrine a particular tale of the Avenue's past: a rural street that grew rapidly and steadily—though certainly not chaotically—developing into the wealthiest residential neighborhood, and then gradually into an elite shopping area. Fifth Avenue was the inevitable product of America's and New York City's social progress and economic development. It was this story that was repeated in five-cent guidebooks, architectural journals, the *RERBG*, and city histories. Collective memory offered a tool to aid the “protectors” of Fifth Avenue in their quest to stop or slow the cycle of creative destruction along the Avenue. The FAA version of history prevailed because it was useful to a number of powerful interests. For real estate developers, businesspeople, and residents of Fifth Avenue, the FAA narrative perpetuated the image of the Avenue as the most desirable and valuable property on the island. The past invented and elaborated by the FAA was only a prologue to its present greatness. Memories of the genteel country road, or even of the brownstones and marble mansions gone by the 1920s, were primarily useful because they served as foils to the present, as a measuring stick for all that had been and would continue to be accomplished. Collective memories of the Avenue were written and retold to “remind” New Yorkers of the glory of their city's growth and to demonstrate their responsibility in preserving its prosperity. The FAA in essence “codified” New York's memory of Fifth Avenue through its annual reports, anniversary books (especially those in 1924 and 1927, and later in 1957), pageants, and essay contests for schoolchildren. Ironically, then, in the hands of the FAA and others, collective memories served as instruments for slowing or stopping history, freezing Fifth Avenue in a particularly profitable form (figure 2.8).

Perhaps the most important part of this narrative is its ending: in order to “preserve” the Avenue at its height, the FAA needed to make its own increasingly interventionist work part of the story. In a form not unlike Puritan jeremiads, the FAA articulated a crisis narrative in which they portrayed themselves as the saviors of a Fifth Avenue threatened with physical and social destruction. The danger was the future: ominous trends—especially the “invasion” of manufacturing lofts and their immigrant workers, increased traffic, beggars and peddlers—portended a downward spiral in the prestige and allure of Fifth Avenue.

The FAA, it should be clear, was not a bastion of antiquarianism, urging—like some preservation advocates—that New York simply hold onto the past. The problem, as it would be for slum clearance advocates and historic preservationists, lay primarily in “managing” creative destruction. The FAA ardently sought to prevent certain types of destruction while encouraging others. Thus, height rules were meant to preserve upper Fifth Avenue (above Fifty-ninth Street, along Central Park) as an elite row of mansions and low apartment buildings. At the same time, the FAA long advocated street widening, which required extensive destruction of stoops and front yards and walls. The association was happy for taller buildings (except lofts) to replace rows of dull brownstones. Thus, even as the FAA “resisted” the course of creative destruction, it learned how to manipulate it to achieve its own ends.

The work of the FAA was thus as oriented toward luring and keeping the elite shopping clientele as it was in raising property values. The association began its work with rather limited campaigns to enhance the appearance and experience of Fifth Avenue. At its first meeting in April 1907, the FAA declared its goals to be the “betterment of trade and traffic conditions on the Avenue by taking up for instance questions relating to heavy trucking, garbage disposal, public nuisances, the proposed widening of the Avenue etc. etc.”<sup>110</sup> While ultimately the FAA was best known for its virtual authorship of the 1916 Zoning Resolution, what has been lost in the focus on zoning is another aspect of the FAA's work, an aspect that in present-day New York and other cities may be more relevant. Most of the FAA's energy, even after the passage of the Zoning Act, was occupied with an extensive array of landscape-policing functions that quietly but powerfully shaped the form and activities of Fifth Avenue. Just as the Charity Organization Society's Tenement House Committee served for years as a semi-official city housing agency, the Fifth Avenue Association was, for the “Fifth Avenue section” (comprising Fifth to Madison Avenues and all cross streets), the police and traffic departments, the public art commission, and the city-planning commission. Through its office, which served as a members' clearinghouse for information and assistance, and aided by a variety of ordinances passed on its behalf, the FAA restricted the types of traffic on the Avenue, forcibly removed beggars and peddlers, eliminated certain types of signs, and influenced the architectural design of new buildings.<sup>111</sup>

First and foremost was the regulation of traffic, human and vehicular. The attempts

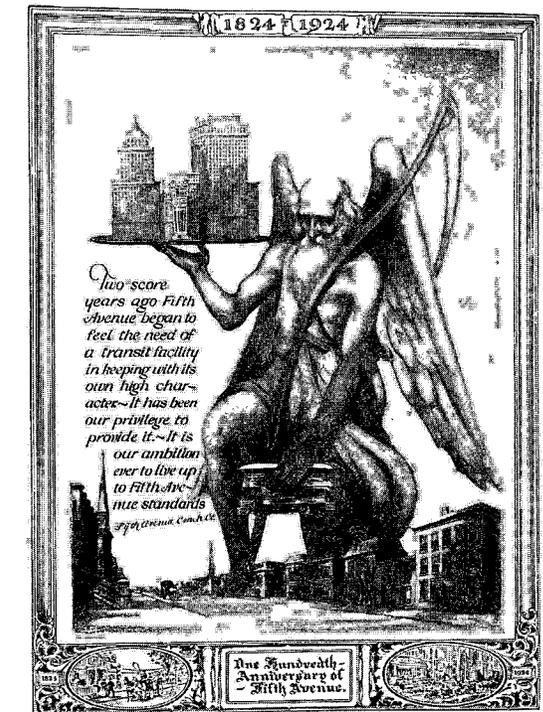


Fig. 2.8. Advertisement for the Fifth Avenue Coach Company from Henry Collins Brown, *Fifth Avenue, Old and New, 1824–1924* (Fifth Avenue Association, 1924). Physical destruction and rebuilding is naturalized in this striking image of Father Time gently substituting tall office buildings for the nineteenth-century brownstones that had dominated Fifth Avenue. United States History, Local History & Genealogy Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

to address the continued problem of traffic congestion in the city had been unsuccessful.<sup>112</sup> As the new century began, the city launched a more interventionist program of street widening along Fifth Avenue. The FAA wholeheartedly supported the effort and continually urged that the city proceed further up the Avenue.<sup>113</sup> The widening—which gave the Avenue thirty extra pedestrian and vehicular feet—helped in the short run, but as business increased on the Avenue, the problems persisted (see figure 2.3). In its first two decades, the FAA advocated a number of restrictions on vehicular traffic—for example, restricting the number of cabs and delivery trucks and the times of use for those vehicles. In 1922, in a much heralded action, the FAA placed elaborate traffic towers at key intersections to relieve the worsening congestion.<sup>114</sup> Although progressive in their engineering, the traffic towers suggested the more reactionary goals of the FAA: to preserve a slower-paced retail and residential corridor.

The FAA was equally concerned with the quality of traffic. It was far more forgiving of private cars than of delivery trucks heading downtown. And it was, of course, far more receptive to crowds of wealthy women shoppers than the peddlers and beggars who gravitated to the Avenue for sales and donations. Lamenting the “growing inconvenience caused by the great numbers of pedlers [*sic*] and beggars now infesting Fifth Avenue at all hours of the day and night,” the FAA suggested that “further active steps be taken to rid the Avenue of this growing nuisance.”<sup>115</sup> Parades represented a different but equally noxious type of traffic. Though the Fifth Avenue parade would come to be an important Avenue and New York tradition, the FAA complained in the first decades of the century about “indiscriminate use of Fifth Avenue for street parades” that result in “a very serious loss of business to merchants along that thoroughfare, without any real compensating gain to the public.” In a letter to Mayor William Gaynor in 1912, the FAA wrote that it was “absolutely opposed to the indiscriminate use of Fifth Avenue, between Twenty-third and Fifty-ninth Streets for parading purposes”:

We object to all parades except patriotic and civic parades and parades in general on holidays or at night and the disastrous affect on business at other times makes it imperative that this protest be made. The loss to merchants during the year is enormous, accounting to millions of dollars, and we respectfully request that all other than patriotic and civic parades except on holidays or at night be directed to other thoroughfares.<sup>116</sup>

Thus, even as the painter Childe Hassam was memorializing the Fifth Avenue parade as an icon in American life, the FAA was fighting to eliminate parades in general.

Similarly conservative goals were established for the architectural form of the Avenue. From its founding the FAA was obsessed with regulating the visual landscape of Fifth Avenue. It was the appearance of Fifth Avenue as much as the actual activities that

took place behind the walls of brownstone (and increasingly steel) that gave it its character, its sheen of wealth and exclusivity. As a virtual outdoor museum of residential, institutional, and commercial architecture created by the day's finest architects, Fifth Avenue represented to elite New Yorkers the last and best hope for securing a grand Beaux Arts avenue, worthy of New York's prominent place in the pantheon of world cities.

Despite the praise heaped on Fifth Avenue for its magnificent growth and its stunning private residences, however, there was a nagging sense of dissatisfaction among city builders. By the second decade of the twentieth century, it seemed clear to city builders that New Yorkers were unwilling or unable to redesign the street structure of Manhattan—as had been done in Paris, and had been proposed by Daniel Burnham for Chicago and San Francisco. The Municipal Art Society's (MAS's) plans for a Beaux Arts planned city inspired by Paris had come to nothing. The 1904 City Improvement Commission report, which the MAS had inspired, followed by a 1907 plan, produced little in the way of monuments and boulevards that would transform New York's regimented grid into an efficient and elegant metropolis. The FAA, along with the MAS and other civic organizations dedicated to beautifying the city, turned its attention to shaping the basic design of private buildings along the Avenue.<sup>117</sup> In just its third year, the FAA made clear that its primary architectural goal for the Avenue was

the beauty of the Avenue as a whole, rather than the beauty of each particular building, important though the latter be. The development of Fifth Avenue along the lines of beauty is largely a matter of the willingness of architect and owner to sacrifice their own interest for the benefit of the whole—in other words to erect buildings which will contribute to the beauty of the Avenue in its ensemble, and not with the purpose solely of making conspicuous their own establishment . . . there must be a certain amount of self sacrifice to bring about a generally satisfactory effect.<sup>118</sup>

The FAA hoped to avoid on the upper half of the Avenue the “jumble of buildings of greatly varying height and greatly varying color, without really any consideration of neighboring construction.”<sup>119</sup> The Fifth Avenue Commission lamented the fact that “a noble approach to our finest Park and a real parkway has been permitted so to degenerate that we must abandon for the time being at least, all thought of making it the counterpart of any of the splendid avenues of Paris or other great cities abroad. Yet while the time has gone by for such a hope, we may nevertheless . . . still make of Fifth Avenue a dignified street . . . it need not be without impressive features.”<sup>120</sup> The FAA was never able to legally enforce design restrictions, but its architectural committee regularly evaluated new building plans and planned changes to the Avenue's buildings.<sup>121</sup>

Because the FAA believed that one way to make existing and future buildings and stores more “dignified” was to prevent the proliferation of signs, it was vigilant in regulating and even outlawing certain types of signage. It fought against signs oriented perpendicular to the street, against lighted signs, and, most of all, “for sale” signs.<sup>122</sup> As early as 1910, it passed a resolution protesting the use of “unsightly” electric signs on Fifth Avenue as against the “best interests of the public. . . . [T]his Association disapproves of the construction and maintenance of unsightly electric, gas, advertising signs, or signs of any other character, on the roofs, or against the walls, or affixed to any part of the premises of buildings on Fifth Avenue. . . . That such signs, because of their appearance, use or operation, are inartistic and unsuitable, and are inimical to the best interests of the public, and to the property owners, as well as to the merchants, residents, and to others who make use of said Avenue.”<sup>123</sup> The FAA was not utterly opposed to the new technologies of advertising. The month after declaring its commitment to the “abatement and abolishment of such sign displays” in 1910, the association initiated a series of tests of new methods of shop-window lighting; the following month, the FAA invited a lighting expert to talk about it.<sup>124</sup> For the FAA, these parallel pursuits were not contradictory: there was a fundamental difference between the tasteful illumination of a respectable store’s wares for passing pedestrians, and the garish, large-scale lighting displays designed simply to lure shoppers. So, just as Broadway was gaining its fame as the “Great White Way” from its thousands of lights from theaters and advertisements, Fifth Avenue was succeeding in eliminating such displays.

For the first fourteen years of its existence, the FAA operated by means of informal pressure to ensure that sign styles met its approval. But under its urging, in December 1921, the mayor approved a new sign ordinance designed to eliminate virtually all illuminated signs on the Avenue. While a number of merchants protested and even legally challenged the ordinance, it ultimately prevailed. The FAA insisted that even the objectors ended up supporting the ordinance: “The removal of their own signs convinced them no harm to their business followed and that the value of the property was actually enhanced.” After writing the ordinance, the FAA then took it upon itself to serve as regulatory agency, undertaking “continual and regular inspections” to ferret out “all unsightly and illegal signs.” Using the political and economic prestige of its membership, the FAA sought to eliminate “obnoxious” signs from the sides and roofs of Fifth Avenue buildings. For example, a building at Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street that sold roof space for advertisers was a particular annoyance for the FAA. Approaching the advertisers as opposed to the owner, the FAA sought and received “voluntary” commitments to “cancel their contracts upon the expiration of their leases.”<sup>125</sup>

The FAA found early on in its life that efforts at cajoling and admonishing property owners and retailers to maintain the look and dignity of Fifth Avenue would be ineffective against the far larger forces shaping the Avenue. The fast and radical changes of Fifth Avenue did not go unnoticed. The FAA secretary noted in the minutes to only the third meeting that the FAA would be meeting at the Holland Hotel (at Fifth Avenue and Thirtieth Street) because its previous meeting place, the infamous Fifth Avenue Hotel (at Fifth and Twenty-third) had been demolished.<sup>126</sup> Though the FAA would never give up its more genteel efforts to shape the Avenue, the leaders of the organization quickly realized that the forces of creative destruction would require stronger interventionist efforts.

#### ZONING THE AVENUE, ZONING NEW YORK

Only a few years after it was formed, the FAA recognized that it had to be more than a beautification agency if it wished to accomplish its goals of protecting the Avenue as an elite retail and residential area. If the FAA began as a nineteenth-century “beautification” organization, it soon became something far more radical and far-reaching. The association’s concerted lobbying bore fruit in 1916, when the first comprehensive zoning law was passed.<sup>127</sup> This single law forever changed how cities would be built; governmental regulation of development now became a dominant force in shaping the form of the city. The FAA, however, was the key force in bringing the zoning movement to fruition in 1916. Without overstating the case, it should be clear that a private organization, advocating primarily the interests of a very particular section of the city, is behind the national movement for citywide zoning. In the name of “preserving” a place with a particular meaning, a perceived social significance, and a distinct, measurable economic value, the FAA proposed to transform city policy concerning urban space.

The 1916 Zoning Resolution was surely “overdetermined”: for years, a wide range of citizen groups and politicians had been urging the city to intervene more significantly to address the problems of light and air, traffic, and aesthetic monstrosities. Although historical accounts traditionally begin with the conflict over the Equitable Building in Lower Manhattan, it was a series of developments that provided the political and intellectual setting for zoning. Though it would take years for city and regional planning to take hold—many would say it never did—a number of factors set the stage early in the century for zoning: the writings of key figures in city planning (George Ford, Edward Bassett, Nelson Lewis, Benjamin Marsh) that placed comprehensive city planning on the forefront of policy discussions; a strong borough president (George McAneny, 1910–13),<sup>128</sup> a firm and active believer in the ideas of the

nascent planning movement; a number of massive public works projects (bridges, subways, street widenings) that suggested the need and possibility of citywide planning; the 1912 excess law (to be discussed further in chapter 3) that allowed for larger government building projects; and, finally, a series of precedents in other cities that inspired zoning and height limitations in New York.<sup>129</sup>

Nevertheless, the efforts of the FAA—which had begun long before the Equitable Building went up and down—were decisive in passing the 1916 Zoning Resolution. Though adherents to the nascent city-planning movement had for years before the zoning ordinance been agitating for land-use controls—including height limitations and use-segregation—it was only when the FAA pushed for the creation of a quasi-governmental Fifth Avenue Commission that these ideas were brought to the forefront of public debate. The FAA viewed the rapid rebuilding along the Avenue as both a grave threat and a rare opportunity to firmly establish Fifth Avenue; failure to act would mean disaster. “There is probably no street or avenue in this great city to which the question of height limitation is of as much importance as Fifth Avenue,” the FAA declared,

no district whose interests and character are as much affected by it as the Fifth Avenue district. It is now, and for some years to come will be, in a constant, seething turmoil of tearing down and rebuilding, and it is safe to say that a few years from now, with perhaps a few exceptional houses, the busy section of Fifth Avenue will be composed entirely of new buildings.<sup>130</sup>

In their aggressive campaign for height limitations and ultimately citywide zoning, various members of the FAA appealed to the Commission on Building Heights with dramatic statements of the future of Fifth Avenue. Robert Grier Cooke, the founder and long-time president of the FAA, stated simply that without height limitations, “It is not too much to say that the very existence of the Avenue, as New York residents have known it for many years, is threatened.”<sup>131</sup> Frank Veiller, a member of the FAA, declared that without legislation halting the increase of loft buildings on the Avenue, “Fifth Avenue, as now known, will be lost to this city forever.”<sup>132</sup>

The FAA had begun its efforts to involve city government with its campaigns for street widening and signage regulations. But it took its advocacy for the Avenue further when it successfully lobbied McAneny to establish a Fifth Avenue Commission expressly to deal with the problems faced by Fifth Avenue residents and retailers. The commission, meeting in 1912 and 1913, produced an ordinance proposal on limiting heights, but the Board of Aldermen ultimately rejected it. However, the ideas put forth in the Fifth Avenue Commission were elaborated on a citywide basis in the new

Heights of Buildings Commission, formed in 1913. This commission was accompanied by the Commission on Building Districts and Restrictions, and in 1914 the standing Committee on the City Plan. It was the Commission on Building Districts and Restrictions that ultimately, in 1916, produced its report advocating comprehensive use and building height and mass limitations for New York City.

The focus of the work of these commissions, and of the 1916 Zoning Resolution, was strongly shaped by the vision of the FAA for the Avenue and its surrounding elite district. In specific instances, the Avenue was given special treatment by the commissioners. For example, virtually all of Manhattan below Central Park was divided into zones in which buildings could rise to one and one-half or two times the width of a street—except for Fifth Avenue between Thirty-fourth and Fifty-ninth Streets, where the FAA managed to procure the lowest of all ratios: buildings could rise no more than one and one-quarter times the width of the street.<sup>133</sup> Many in the FAA leadership had sought even lower height limitations but were satisfied to have at least secured this victory. But in far more fundamental ways, the whole focus of the commissions—on segregating residential and industrial areas, on limiting heights, on creating a stable real estate market—was shaped by the FAA's own interests.

While the FAA's program of activities was broad and wide—ranging from street tree planting to fighting the proliferation of signs—the association's most far-reaching goal was to stop the construction of loft manufacturing buildings on the Avenue. These lofts had already been built up in the lower part of the Avenue—between Fourteenth and Twenty-third Streets and even around Washington Square. Indeed, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, whose devastating fire of 1911 inspired labor reforms and transformed New York City politics, was a classic loft building, located almost on the site where Henry James grew up. The FAA used the fire as a springboard for its campaign to regulate and ultimately eliminate loft buildings from the Avenue.<sup>134</sup>

The FAA's greatest impact on New York (and on other cities) came from its advocacy of height limitations and segregation of uses, which grew from its disgust with the loft structures. In a long statement to the Fifth Avenue Commission in 1913, the FAA's lawyer, Bruce Falconer, argues that lofts “have practically ruined that part of the Avenue” between Fourteenth and Twenty-third Streets. They “have utterly changed its former high-class character, and have had a derogatory effect upon the entire neighborhood”:

These buildings are crowded with their hundreds and thousands of garment workers and operators who swarm down upon the Avenue for the lunch hour between twelve and one o'clock. They stand upon or move slowly along the sidewalks and choke them up. Pedestrians thread their way through the crowds as best they may.

The influx of immigrant workers, claims Falconer, had frightened away women shoppers, depressed property values, and encouraged an exodus of "high-class shops and stores."<sup>135</sup> As always, the FAA saw its work in terms of preservation: steps had to be taken to protect Fifth Avenue "from the loft building and factory employee menace."<sup>136</sup>

The primary reason the FAA fought so fiercely against the expansion of loft buildings on the Avenue was the immigrant domination of the factory workforce. Like its campaign against beggars, the FAA was concerned about maintaining the "quality" of people inhabiting and using the Avenue. At first the FAA used the tactics it had used with beggars—forcibly removing them. With the encouragement of the FAA, police arrested lurching garment workers for loitering on the Avenue. When that provoked outrage from the mayor, the FAA resorted to an education campaign: placards in several languages explained to the workers the detriment to all of loitering and spitting tobacco juice.<sup>137</sup>

The FAA held numerous meetings to seek a private solution to the problem of immigrant workers crowding the Avenue. In February 1911, for example, the FAA's "Loitering Committee" met with the Cloak and Suit Workers Union in order to negotiate "the problem of control of the crowds" and discuss the possibility of "roping off sections" of side streets for the workers.<sup>138</sup> At the same time, it met repeatedly with the owners' Cloak and Suit Manufacturers Association to discuss how to control the workers.<sup>139</sup> Thus, even amid the effort to seek the intervention of the city in restricting building heights and uses, the FAA was equally persistent in applying its economic and social influence to protect the Avenue.

If the fear of immigrant "hordes" ruining the high-class atmosphere of Fifth Avenue was foremost in the minds of the FAA, this concern pointed to other, even larger dangers. The FAA saw in the orgy of loft construction a debilitating set of changes taking place in the social and physical appearance of the Avenue. Loft construction was particularly volatile: the buildings were often cheap, built rapidly, and financially insecure because of the unstable nature of the garment industry. When they were vacated, often within a few years of construction, the loft buildings could not be easily converted to other uses. Narrow and tall with long, dark interiors, usually built upon one or two twenty-five-foot lots previously occupied by brownstones, the buildings were appropriate only for factories or cheap business ventures. The presence of single, ten-story towers on narrow lots was an ironic product of Fifth Avenue's tradition as the brownstone and marble mansion home to New York's elite families. With city taxes calculated to the full market value of the site, a brownstone lot was "worth" a phenomenal sum if, as tax policy assumed, the owner could develop his or her land to its fullest extent.<sup>140</sup> But because Fifth Avenue's property was largely held in small parcels

by individual landowners—many of whom were willing to "hold out" for years—developers could rarely assemble large lots. Thus, as individual families sold off their brownstones, developers quickly put up individual loft buildings to accommodate burgeoning garment-related industries. Whether by individual homeowners or by the FAA, "preservation" of Fifth Avenue as it was defied the logic of creative destruction.

The 1916 Zoning Resolution was not, in the end, a radical measure; it was only revolutionary through its influence on other cities and as the precedent for future city-planning efforts. The ordinance accelerated the demolition of Fifth Avenue's nineteenth-century past by creating an ordered framework in which developers and architects could develop and redevelop the Avenue. Had a more laissez-faire system of real estate prevailed, Fifth Avenue might have become a permanent center for the garment manufacturers and other small businesses, up to and even beyond Central Park. The problems that can be seen in J. F. L. Collins's photos, if not in his text, were the result of an unregulated market for land along the Avenue.

But not all of this can be attributed to the 1916 Zoning Resolution. The ordinance, we must remember, was not retroactive. The loft buildings and empty lots, the garish signs and "dull" brownstones, would not rapidly be removed like the massive urban renewal efforts later in the century. The grand schemes of the FAA had never worked: plans of bridges over Forty-second Street and a diagonal avenue connecting Pennsylvania Station and the public library at Forty-second Street were quickly removed from the table. The 1916 Zoning Resolution shifted the trajectory of private development along the Avenue, but almost immediately after it was passed, the FAA and its supporters recognized that its first strategies—of private pressure of landowners and businesses—would be even more important in the future. Even as the Zoning Resolution was being debated in 1916, the FAA and other groups—including the City Club—launched the "Save New York" campaign designed to force existing garment manufacturers off Fifth Avenue. The "removal of the menace" would occupy these groups well into the 1920s, when—backed by the limited new powers of state regulation and the less limited powers of capital—the Save New York campaign successfully managed to relocate the garment industry to Seventh Avenue, where much of it remains today.<sup>141</sup>

#### CONCLUSION: THE PROGRESS OF PRESERVATION

Helen Henderson's *Loiterer in the City* (1917) opens with a photograph of the Plaza Hotel at the southwest corner of Central Park. In the background is Cornelius Vanderbilt's mansion; in the foreground is the Pulitzer Fountain, which Henderson calls

the "Fountain of Abundance." It is a revealing name. For many this was a suitable metaphor: Fifth Avenue was a physical manifestation of the American economic abundance. The wealth of the nation had not gushed forth randomly, but instead had been channeled almost naturally to the "spine of Gotham," where it was transformed into the grandest buildings America had yet seen, of which the Plaza and Vanderbilt's colossal mansion were two of the greatest.

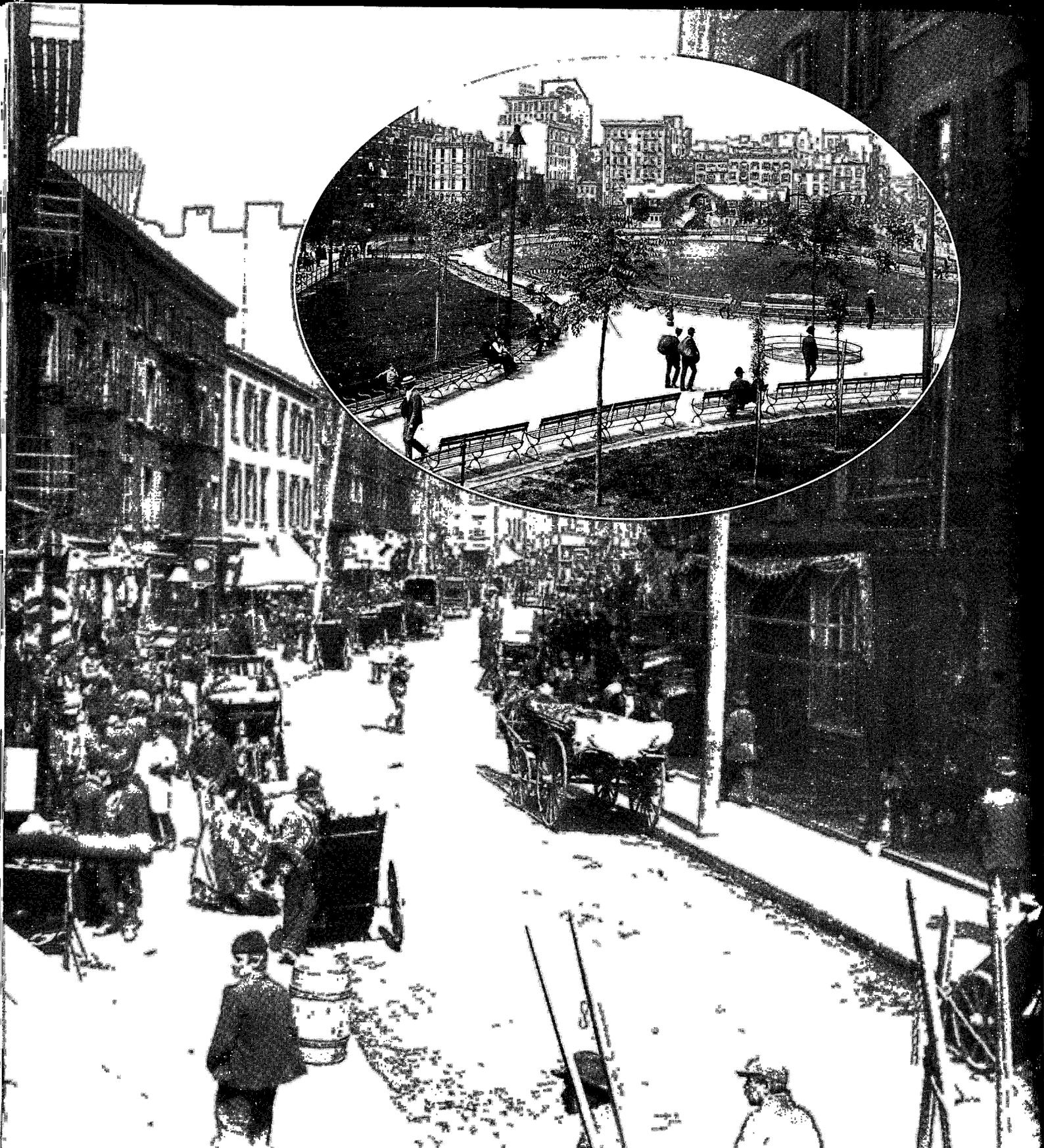
Fifth Avenue's development, however, was hardly fluid. Fifth Avenue was indeed a symbol of the process of private city-building efforts; it was also a model of private and public intervention in shaping the urban landscape. But it did not grow easily, steadily, and by some natural physical laws. Rather, Fifth Avenue mimicked the fitful and chaotic creation and destruction that characterized the city as a whole, and it proved that government involvement would be necessary to manage the abundant flow.

It was the FAA that most powerfully shaped at least part of the Avenue's future. It did this by pioneering far-reaching reforms all in the name of "conserving" Fifth Avenue's economic and cultural achievements. The choice of this term—repeated on the front page of each annual report of the organization—is not simply linguistic irony. The FAA certainly was not primarily interested in historic preservation. Indeed, it encouraged height limitations in part to prevent skyscrapers and pushed for the rapid removal of "antiquated structures" that marred the "new Fifth Avenue."<sup>142</sup> Nevertheless, debate over Fifth Avenue's future centered around the issue of preservation, although the meaning of that term constantly shifted. The FAA primarily sought to bolster property values by preserving the physical appearance and economic uses of the Avenue. However, it often embraced the destruction of older buildings in order to literally pave the way for more efficient traffic conditions and expand the area of development. Others, such as the "loitering" Helen Henderson, expressed a sentimental attachment to a past that was quickly receding from view. "Assuredly," Henderson remarked about the sight of the decrepit homes of Theodore Roosevelt, William Cullen Bryant, and the Metropolitan Museum, "oblivion is better than this."<sup>143</sup> For her, the preservation of the old homes would mean the preservation of the values that once held sway along the Avenue.

The recurrent question of Fifth Avenue's future development in the first decades of the twentieth century forces a reconsideration of what was meant by preservation and modernization, development and destruction. For Fifth Avenue had few historic buildings to preserve. Only below Fourteenth Street were there old homes that could be considered "historic." Indeed, as Reynolds wrote in 1916, Fifth Avenue "represents construction more than reconstruction and as yet it has not many memories."<sup>144</sup> And yet, the Fifth Avenue of this era is, ironically, a preservation story. Like historic preser-

vationists who sought to protect historic buildings, the FAA and others desperately sought to "preserve" Fifth Avenue, and they couched their struggle in those terms.

One of the tropes that powerfully describes New York to its own citizens and defines it for the rest of the world, even to this day, is the "city of extremes." While writers and guidebooks falsely elaborated an overly stark social polarization of New York life between "sunshine and shadow," their metaphor was accurate in its suggestion that Fifth Avenue and the slums of the Lower East Side were part of the same economic process, as inextricably linked as the sun and its shadow. For just as the Lower East Side and its "foul core" of slums had been created by the workings of speculative markets, so too was Fifth Avenue the product of real estate trading, building, demolishing, and rebuilding. But Fifth Avenue revealed the problems of overdevelopment and excessively rapid change, while the slums of the Lower East Side exposed the opposite dilemma of underdevelopment and sluggish rates of destruction and rebuilding. It was a remarkable irony that in the land of shadows, where life seemed to be dangling by a thin thread, the actual persistence of buildings was greater than in the august reaches of Fifth Avenue. The infuriating endurance of Mulberry's slums inspired reformers and city officials to intervene in the real estate market and accelerate the process of creative destruction.



### 3 THE "FOUL CORE" OF NEW YORK

#### The Rise of Slum Clearance as Housing Reform

Where Mulberry Street crooks like an elbow . . . is "the Bend," the foul core of New York's slums.

—Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*

. . . when you operate in an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat ax.

—Robert Moses, *Public Works: A Dangerous Trade*

Joseph Mitchell, the *New Yorker's* inveterate observer of the city's characters and cultures for half a century, explored the endless subworlds of New York. In the early 1950s, as he describes in *The Bottom of the Harbor*, Mitchell encountered lobster fishermen and oyster hunters, the few remaining citizens who could recall a time when New York was built on the work of its harbor industries. Mitchell's story is tinged with regret for this passing world, of marshes filled in for sports fields or for airports, of docks and piers removed for highways.

Then there were the tenements of the "Lung Block" (so called because of the prevalence of tuberculosis among the inhabitants) by the East River. This block stood on the city's notorious Lower East Side, where Knickerbocker Village, one of New York's first public housing efforts, now stands (figure 3.3). "There are bricks and brownstone blocks and plaster and broken glass from hundreds upon hundreds of condemned tenements in the New Grounds," observes Mitchell:

The ruins of the somber old red-brick houses in the Lung Block, which were torn down to make way for Knickerbocker Village, lie there. In the first half of the nineteenth century, these houses were occupied by well-to-do families; from around 1890 until around 1905 until they were torn down, in 1933, they were rented to the poorest of the poor, and the tuberculosis death rate was higher in that block than in any other block in the city. All the organisms that grow on wrecks grow on the hills of rubble and rubbish in the Subway Rocks and the New Grounds.<sup>1</sup>

Fig. 3.1. Jacob Riis, *The Mulberry Bend*, circa 1890. Museum of the City of New York, The Jacob A. Riis Collection.

Fig. 3.2. (inset) Jacob Riis, *Mulberry Bend, Park*, 1919. Museum of the City of New York, The Jacob A. Riis Collection.

The tenements, the purveyors of disease, were ripped down in a burst of government initiative, carted off to the Brooklyn coast and deposited on the shore. And like the ideal prison inmate, resolved to truly reform his ways, those tenements were serving their time well: The minerals in the old brownstone and brick, so condemned as sponges of disease, became blocks of nutrients for sea animals starving in the polluted harbor of New York. The tenements that brought so much sickness and death now offered new life to the sea.

The life of the Lung Block slums on the East Side is a wonderful image for understanding the politics of slum clearance in New York City. It suggests the dialectic between creation and destruction that animated efforts to reform housing conditions among New York's poor. Two opposite impulses have motivated different schools of "reformers" over the past century and a half. First is the impulse to provide better conditions for the worst-off citizens, by improving their physical environment, amenities, or services available to them. The second is the impulse to destroy what is "unhealthy" in the city, as a surgeon would eliminate a diseased part of the body in the interest of protecting the whole. These competing ideologies are manifested most clearly in the struggles over the neighborhoods of New York's Lower East Side.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the "creative" impulse dominated, as intellectuals and activists alike dreamed of ways to make city life more pleasant and healthy for all its residents. But by the end of the nineteenth century, the ramshackle wooden and brick tenements of the Lung Block began to be seen as spawning grounds for disease, vice, and social unrest. A generation of housing reformers began to advocate their elimination—by the slow and haphazard collective acts of a thousand real estate developers and the rapid machinery of government bulldozers—as the ultimate creative act. As surely as bad housing for the poor would destroy individual lives and corrupt the entire city, so would parks and a wholly different kind of housing redeem Manhattan. This focus on destruction as the goal would have grave repercussions for the future of New York City. The policies begun in the late nineteenth century shaped urban development politics and policy for the next hundred years.

This chapter traces the rise of the idea of slum clearance, from its haphazard beginnings at Mulberry Bend in the notorious Lower East Side "Five Points"—named for the intersection of five streets: Mulberry, Anthony (now Worth), Cross (now Park), Orange (now Baxter), and Little Water (which no longer exists)—to the beginning of the 1930s when the New Deal institutionalized programs of large-scale slum elimination and public housing construction. Over the first three decades of the twentieth century, New York pioneered not only institutional and public policy strategies that would pave the way for massive federal public housing and clearance programs,



but also the intellectual framework and cultural attitudes that were crucial to supporting an ethic of demolition. By the 1950s, New York had embraced an ethic of slum removal, under the leadership of Robert Moses, and had become a leader in urban renewal politics and techniques. Understanding the roots of this ideology, and the motivation of the government and private-sector elites who spearheaded it, is crucial to any evaluation of urban development in the twentieth century.

This chapter therefore describes the precedents to the massive slum clearance efforts of the 1930s and the even more extensive urban renewal efforts of the 1950s. Those efforts made up what one historian has called the "most important public policy undertaken by New York after World War II."<sup>2</sup> Despite the extensive literature on housing and housing reform in the United States and especially New York City, historians have never fully explained the intellectual and cultural dynamic that provided justification—and celebration—of an ethic of tenement destruction. Perhaps we have

Fig. 3.3. Cherry and Monroe Streets, 1932. In one of the earliest slum clearance efforts, this block was torn down to make way for Knickerbocker Village. Along Cherry Street are the early-nineteenth-century townhouses that Berenice Abbott would photograph in anticipation of their demise. Collections of the Municipal Archives of the City of New York.

too easily believed the assumption of some reformers that the removal of tenements was an inevitable solution to the tenement house problem—that no matter what else was tried, destruction was an ultimate step. Or perhaps the early history of urban renewal has seemed unconnected to later, larger-scale efforts. In standard histories of housing, the roots of slum clearance are treated only tangentially and parenthetically, as if the New Deal public housing and urban planning initiatives were a brand-new strategy. In most accounts, slum clearance seems to emerge from nowhere, a radical new reaction to problems that had long existed.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, the “tenement problem” had been debated since the early nineteenth century. The rhetorical exhortations of moral guardians at that time had brought piecemeal housing regulations and moderate suggestions for model low-income housing. But in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these efforts were supplanted by a far more radical suggestion: the elimination of tenements by demolition. How did the early-nineteenth-century reformer, who walked the streets, climbed the tenements, and worked slowly to provide the slums with running water and parks give way to the blunt vocabulary of the wrecking ball and bulldozer? How did the social reformer who zealously explored the “shadows” of New York, returning from the “foul core” to appeal for tenement regulations, yield to planners who sat in a room with an aerial map and felt-tipped pens, circling neighborhoods and labeling them “slum clearance”?

Slum clearance marked a sharp break with past practice and ideology. The twin pillars of nineteenth-century housing reform were the inviolability of private property and limited government action. Slum clearance challenged both of these: it required that the government expend great amounts of money to remove the unacceptable products of a private real estate market. As a radical challenge to the status quo of housing reform, the ideology of slum clearance becomes a far more complex story, revealing the fault lines in the beliefs of elite New Yorkers regarding the role of public and private actors, the awkward adolescence of city government, and powerful cultural dilemmas concerning the diversity of the modern city, all played out over these vilified buildings.

The story has an ironic twist. Despite all the hand-wringing over the horrible conditions of the tenements and the viciousness with which they were attacked by almost everyone, the level of planned slum clearance was actually extremely small until the 1930s. New York may have been known as the city that tore itself down every ten years—more so even than Chicago, the true “phoenix” city that rebuilt itself out of the ashes of the 1871 fire—but when it came to the tenements it hated, it hesitated and failed to act. Despite decades of acknowledgment of the problem, destruction did not become the dominant method of coping with substandard hous-

ing until the 1930s. Thus, our story is as much about failure: Why did destruction of tenements take hold so late despite powerful political advocates and weighty European examples? What ideologies and cultural patterns encouraged elites—both governmental and private—to change course and begin a pattern of large-scale demolition of city neighborhoods?

Ironically, the impetus for this new paragon of urban development—the destructive model—had its roots not in change but in stasis. To Progressive reformers, slum clearance began to seem necessary because the Lower East Side had changed at a slower pace than other parts of the city. If Fifth Avenue epitomized the dangers and the destructive effects (in the eyes of some residents and retailers) of overdevelopment, the story of Mulberry Bend and the Lower East Side’s slums was one of “underdevelopment.” For a host of reasons, the area was consistently unattractive to private developers and remained, to the chagrin of reformers, a neighborhood of deteriorating housing. The history of slum clearance is therefore the mirror image of development along Fifth Avenue. While Fifth Avenue was wrestling with questions of preservation and neighborhood character, in the Lower East Side private developers were urged and government was employed to speed up the process of destruction for eventual rebuilding. Along Fifth Avenue, retailers and homeowners, with the aid of government, had sought to slow or even freeze development. In the Lower East Side, a frustration with the lack of change became fuel for the engine of creative destruction.

#### JACOB RIIS AND THE “LEPROUS HOUSES” OF MULBERRY BEND

If buildings could remember, the oldest tenement in New York would bear the memories of social reformers’ passionate attacks. New York invented the tenement in the United States. Not long afterward, New York also originated the idea of a tenement house “problem” and then the tenement house reformer. The “old-law” (pre-1901) tenements came to define the words “tenement” and “slum.” Earlier, “tenement” had an ideologically neutral meaning in English usage as “an abode for a person or for the soul, in which someone else owned the property.”<sup>4</sup> In New York City, after the enactment of the 1901 housing law, “tenement” had a broadly defined legal meaning: it applied to all buildings housing three families or more—and it applied to nearly three-quarters of the city’s residential structures. But even as the 1901 law defined tenements in this manner, ironically classifying such opulent apartment houses as the Dakota or the Ansonia on the Upper West Side in the same category with the most squalid housing projects, New Yorkers had come to associate “tenement” with “slum.”<sup>5</sup> Mulberry

Bend, even after it had been “cleared,” would be the Platonic counterideal to which all housing for the poor would be compared.

The story begins at the start of the previous century, when the meager land of Manhattan Island and rapid land speculation brought wealth and poverty into close contact and pitted city builders, speculators, and workers against one another in an open conflict for space. Although since 1676 there were precedents for removal of “nuisances”—as dilapidated or vice-ridden housing was called—only in the early nineteenth century did such removal become a tool in the vocabulary of city policy. An 1800 law allowing for demolition by the city applied almost exclusively to abandoned buildings. In a few cases, however, the city used its power of condemnation for purposes other than street laying or other public works: against tenements.<sup>6</sup> Historian Elizabeth Blackmar describes in detail the battle to remove the Five Points that had by 1829 acquired the image as “ground zero,” as we would say today, of sin and debauchery in New York (figure 3.4). Housing “horrors too awful to mention” in its tenements, brothels, saloons, and on its streets, where every sin in the Bible was acted out, the Five Points seemed beyond defense. After four years of legal wrangling, the city finally cleared out the triangle in 1833.<sup>7</sup> Through the 1830s, social reformers, retailers, and others who sought to enhance the value of their property supported further efforts to clean up the Five Points area.

Despite these few highly visible slum clearance efforts, most of the steps taken by the city were far more tentative ones. Although a continuous line of tenement house commissions, committees, boards, and departments all had included demolition as one of their strategies through most of the nineteenth century, destruction functioned mainly as a stock rhetorical device rather than a tool of public policy. Indeed, attacks on the most notorious tenements elicited fiery words and gave reformers a moral high ground from which to preach. But even the worst tenements lasted far longer than the volume of rhetorical bile heaped on them would have portended. Only the most decrepit and dangerous tenements were destroyed by government dictate, and only after many decades of protest and denunciation. Gotham Court, which was built in the 1850s and long stood as a symbol of tenement evil, lived—by New York actuarial tables—to a ripe old age of forty-five, before finally being destroyed in 1895 under the leadership of Jacob Riis. That it lasted so long was a shock and insult to tenement reformers, but was quite typical of the time. An 1853 tenement house committee had condemned the “crazy old buildings” and the Association for the Improvement of the Conditions of the Poor had attacked “these crying evils” and described in detail the horrendous living conditions offered in the court.<sup>8</sup> Declared Lawrence Veiller, the secretary of the 1901 Tenement House Commission:



Fig. 3.4. Marketing at the Five Points, 1869, from *Frank Leslie's Ill. News*.

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It would seem that after such a revelation, no civilized community could tolerate such a condition of affairs for a moment, yet not till nearly forty years later was Gotham Court dealt with. In 1896 it was torn down, and no longer can it send forth its evil influences to pollute the stream of our civic life. But if one could reckon the evil that it has done in the sixty years of its existence, what a heavy sum it would be! Who can estimate the extent of the physical and moral disorder thus created by this one building, the loathsome diseases, the death, the pauperism, the vice, the crime, the debasement of civic life?<sup>9</sup>

Gotham Court owed its demise to the successful efforts a few years earlier to demolish the most notorious of New York's slums, Mulberry Bend. The "Clearing of Mulberry Bend," a three-acre site located a few blocks north and east of City Hall Park, was the first salvo in the battle against the slum, and "one of the first slum clearance projects on a modern scale in New York City."<sup>10</sup> Just north of the infamous Five Points, Mulberry Bend had long been known as one of New York's worst slum areas, and there had been repeated calls for its demolition. But only when Jacob Riis brought his camera there in the late 1880s was "The Bend" finally brought down. Through Riis's eyes, and through his words, New Yorkers learned about the nature of the "shadows" of New York (see figure 3.5).

Jacob Riis's writings and photographs were the effective tools of a fiery social reformer who provided a map of social degradation in New York. A Danish immigrant who came to the United States in 1870, he embraced his new country with a burning patriotism, which drove his intense efforts at tenement reform for more than thirty years. Better than any other housing reformer, Riis was able to bring to the homes of Broadway and Washington Square the lives of those within the Lower East Side tenements. He provided a guide to New York's underside, complete with the tragic dramas of young prostitutes, rampant diseases festering in overcrowded tenements, gambling, and violent encounters in the back alleys of the slums. He told the stories with the authority of an insider, having spent his days and nights exploring the basement saloons, catching sleeping boarders with magnesium flashes, and recording the sweatshop work of children.

Jacob Riis launched the modern attacks on tenements. His contribution exposed the depth of the tenement problem to those who had never been adventurous enough to explore the jungle of the Lower East Side. He was best known, then as now, for his photographs, some of the earliest and finest photojournalistic exposés.<sup>11</sup> Riis's strategies for reform, however, have been underestimated. His call for parks and model tenements have been considered simply part of the dominant vocabulary of social reform

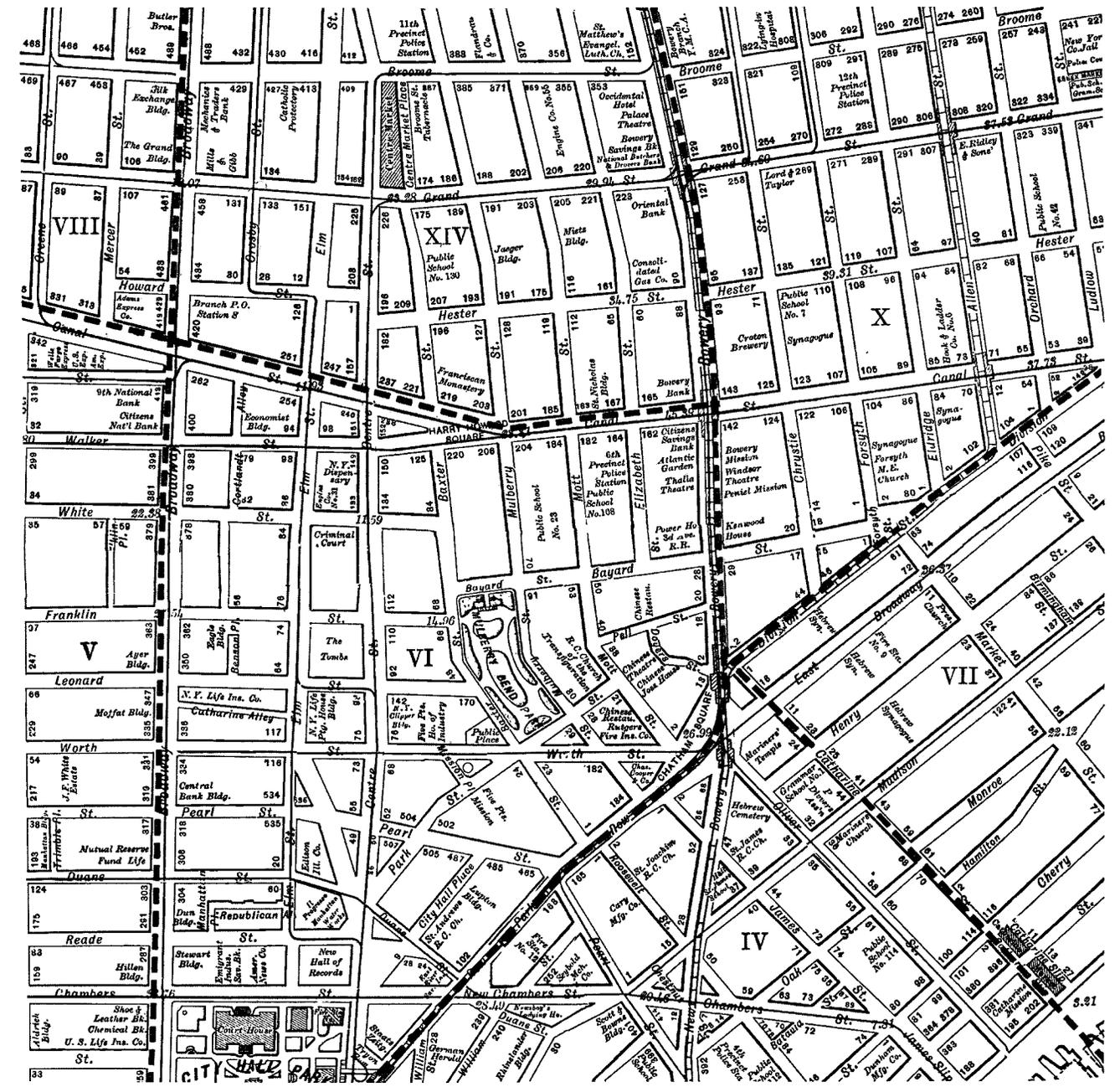


Fig. 3.5. Map from *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (1890; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1971). Mulberry Bend, the "foul core of New York," was located just north and east of New York's City Hall.

of the time. What has been ignored is that it was Riis who gave powerful rhetorical and documentary justification for destruction as an essential tool of tenement reform. On the one hand, he supported model tenements and regulations—he helped found, for example, the City and Suburban Homes Company, one of the early private model-home developers in the city. On the other hand, he was most passionate when arguing that the solution for the worst tenements was removal. Riis had long chided the “optimists of the Health Department” who for so long advocated inspection and enforcement of regulations to improve conditions in the Bend. It was clear to him that “the more that has been done the less it has seemed to accomplish in the way of real relief, until it has at last become clear that nothing short of entire demolition will ever prove of radical benefit.”<sup>12</sup>

For Riis, Mulberry Bend was the “wickedest of American slums,” a place of unmatched physical and moral destruction. “Where Mulberry Street crooks like an elbow . . . is ‘the Bend,’ the foul core of New York’s slums.”<sup>13</sup> His photographs and text, rambling and anecdotal, amount to a description of the degradation inherent in the chaotic world of the tenements. Disheveled men sleep in a basement saloon, a bedraggled man looks up from his “cave-dwelling,” children play baseball amid garbage. This run-down conglomeration of tenements held one of the highest densities of people in New York—upward of seven hundred per acre. It was filled with gangs of youths who committed crimes in such back alleys as Bandits’ Roost and Bottle Alley, inspiring Riis to claim that “it is not exaggeration to say that there is not a foot of ground in the Bend that has not witnessed a deed of violence.”<sup>14</sup> The Bend contained dozens of “stale-beer saloons” and brothels that were “prolific of untold depravities.”<sup>15</sup> The death rate in the Bend, for example, was 50 percent higher than in the rest of the city. Especially tragic was the death rate for children under the age of five—the Tenement House Commission had counted 155 in 1882—which far outpaced the rest of the city.<sup>16</sup> The answer to the disaster of Mulberry Bend was, to Riis, simple: “I got a picture of the Bend upon my mind which as soon as I should be able to transfer it to that of the community would help settle that pig-sty according to its deserts. It was not fit for Christian men and women, let alone innocent children, to live in, and therefore it had to go.”<sup>17</sup>

For Riis, Mulberry Bend was a place of destruction: lives were destroyed by disease, souls were destroyed by sexual sin, hope was destroyed by the weight of accumulated misery. Not all of this despair, he believed, was caused by poverty or other forces beyond the control of Mulberry Bend’s inhabitants. Throughout his work, Riis, like many other reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, maintained an ambivalent relationship to the inhabitants of the tenements. Although he seemed to show sympathy for the subjects of his photographs, his revelatory images

and articles were laced with words of condemnation and racist disgust. Riis’s concern for the immigrants’ living conditions was only matched by his loathing. He often blamed the inhabitants for their own environment, rather than focusing on, for example, city policy or the greed of landlords. The immigrants he observed were considered culpable for the unacceptable conditions of their neighborhoods. Nonetheless, Riis believed that people’s behavior would improve exactly as much as did their living conditions. Tenement dwellers “are shiftless, destructive and stupid,” wrote Riis. “In a word, they are what the tenements have made them.”<sup>18</sup>

Riis was a product and a promoter of a renewed skepticism and disgust with cities at the end of the century. A long-standing American distrust of cities increasingly found receptive authors and audiences. Best-sellers such as Josiah Strong’s *Our Country* (1885), Joaquin Miller’s *Destruction of Gotham* (1886), and Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888) bore testament to a deep-seated loathing of cities.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps most prominent in the litany of fears of the city were unrest, danger, and political upheaval. *The Destruction of Gotham*, for example, is a story of the burning of New York by an angry mob; *Caesar’s Column*, by Ignatius Donnelly, portended a final, devastating conflict between New York’s rich and poor, between what guidebooks had referred to as the “Light and Shadows” of New York.<sup>20</sup> Riis himself, in a remarkable, breathless conclusion to *How the Other Half Lives*, pointed to elite fears of political revolt by immigrant masses. He created an apocalyptic vision of social unrest of the inhabitants he had just portrayed in words and photographs. On a visit to one of New York’s beaches, he drew a parallel between crashing waves in which the immigrants played and the potential for upheaval held in fragile check within the tenements:

Once already our city, to which have come the duties and responsibilities of metropolitan greatness before it was able to fairly measure its task, has felt the swell of its resistless flood. If it rise once more, no human power may avail to check it. The gap between the classes in which it surges, unseen, unsuspected by the thoughtless, is widening day by day. No tardy enactment of law, no political expedient, can close it. Against all other dangers our system of government may offer defense and shelter; against this not. I know of but one bridge that will carry us over safe, a bridge founded upon justice and built of human hearts. I believe that the danger of such conditions as are fast growing up around us is greater for the very freedom which they mock. The words of the poet [James Russell], with whose lines I prefaced this book, are true today, have far deeper meaning to us, than when they were penned forty years ago:

Think ye that building shall endure  
Which shelters the noble and crushes the poor?<sup>21</sup>

For many reformers the "menace of great cities" was encapsulated in and caused by the conditions of the slums.<sup>22</sup> They feared social unrest and resistance to assimilation if immigrants were ill-housed. Improved housing, argued E. R. L. Gould, a national advocate for slum clearance and decent housing, "is a powerful factor in good citizenship. . . . The genesis of 'isms most often takes place in the miserable tenements of a great modern city." These fears served equally to justify parks. Young people, offered "no opportunity for legitimate play, no rational outlet for an excess of animal spirits," naturally were drawn into gangs "for nocturnal maraudings."<sup>23</sup> The 1894 Tenement House Commission (discussed in a following section) insisted that "no one can become familiar with life in the most crowded districts of New York without the conviction that no greater immediate relief can be afforded the inhabitants than by letting in more air and sunshine by means of playgrounds and small parks, and furnishing thereby, near at hand, places for rest, recreation and exercise for young and old."<sup>24</sup> In the small area bounded by Mulberry, Bayard, Baxter, and Park Streets, Progressives could find an agglomeration of all the evils to which they addressed themselves in the city: drunkenness, youth criminality, prostitution, disease, and lack of light and air for children. Reformers were preoccupied as much with the social evils caused by the tenements as with the physical and emotional hardships affecting individuals. The tenements, with Gotham Court as the most wretched example, were "the cause of most of the problems in our modern cities."<sup>25</sup>

Thus for Progressive urban reformers like Riis, the slum was the breeding ground not only for the ills affecting the individuals but for the political fury that might consume the city. And since Progressive reformers saw in the city a series of physical settings for the diminution of the individual and community, they also, logically, believed that changing that environment would be the start of a solution to the problems of the cities. The reformation of Mulberry Bend might not only eliminate the "foul core of New York" but could create quite the opposite movement: homes where virtue could be promoted and healthful activities enjoyed. An ideology of "positive environmentalism," as the historian Paul Boyer has called it, accompanied Riis's powerful "negative environmentalism."<sup>26</sup> If a positive environment had the ability to transform persons and communities for the better, a negative environment had to be eliminated before it infected everyone within its reach.

Even as Riis sought to demolish history and its effects, he wanted to achieve a different future. Destruction of the tenements, in Riis's vision, would be followed by the building of parks, bringing the restorative powers of nature to those deprived of it. Following the tradition laid out by Frederick Law Olmsted, Riis held a nostalgic view of the countryside as the source of American virtues and productive citizenship.



Just as the tenements intrinsically held some elemental evil, "nature," in the pastoral form perfected by Olmsted in New York, magically diminished the desire of people to commit crimes, inspired them to hard work, and molded them into active, committed citizens.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, pastoral parks were a symbol of order, of the steady, thoughtful domination of nature, which would serve as a reprieve from the chaotic street life of Mulberry Bend (figure 3.6).<sup>28</sup>

With this view, Riis salvaged a creative meaning from the destruction of Mulberry Bend. "So the Mulberry Bend had its mission after all," he wrote just after the park was dedicated. "The filth began there, and now that it is ended and won, we look upon smoothly paved and cleanly swept streets. . . . It is all the work of the decade that began the battle with the Bend. Its mission was not for New York only, but for the whole country; for by its lessons every American city may profit."<sup>29</sup> In the place of the "foul core" of New York's tenement district would be "trees and grass and flowers; for its dark hovels light and sunshine and air."<sup>30</sup> Where tenements sank their inhabitants into physical and moral disease, parks raised them up with their inherent restorative powers. Of course, in Riis's description, the people are entirely absent from the "after" picture. Where once hordes of filthy inhabitants crowded

Fig. 3.6. Postcard: "Mulberry Bend Park," 1907. The crowded, decrepit tenements of "The Bend" are replaced with the clean curves of an Olmstedian park. Museum of the City of New York.

into slums, now only sunshine and open space take their place. It is unclear where all the people have gone.

In order to achieve this vision of "reform," Riis took the connection between environment and social condition, so central to Progressive reformers' beliefs, to a logical extreme. "There is," he insisted, "a connection between the rottenness of the house and that of the tenant that is patent and positive."<sup>31</sup> But even more than this, Mulberry Bend, and the other slums like it, not only created the crowded and dangerous conditions where human depravity could flourish, but became themselves generators of that depravity. Riis anthropomorphized the tenements, making these configurations of real estate into base participants rather than mere shelters for human activity. "Such a slum as this is itself the poison," he wrote about the Bend:

It taints whatever it touches. Wickedness and vice gravitate toward it and are tenfold aggravated, until crime is born spontaneously of its corruption. . . . Recovery is impossible under its blight. Rescue and repression are alike powerless to reach it.<sup>32</sup>

Mulberry Bend "had to go" because it was so horrible, beyond redemption. When he was asked if the result of destroying Mulberry Bend was simply to scatter poverty, Riis insisted that "the greater and by far the worst part of it [poverty] is destroyed with the slum . . . something is gained in the mere shifting about; some of the dirt is lost on the way."<sup>33</sup> Riis's faith in demolition was passionate, highly emotional, but with little intellectual foundation or long-term vision. His intended solutions were unclear—what would happen to the immigrants displaced by destruction, and whose responsibility was this? Throughout his reform campaigns, Riis remained deeply critical of profiteering landlords and of political corruption that protected them. But rarely did Riis insist that the root cause of the slum problem was a system of property exploitation. In the end he always returned to the tenements themselves, as literal personifications of depravity.

What made Mulberry Bend utterly unredeemable? Although Mulberry Bend was by any empirical evaluation—density, disease, mortality rate—one of the worst slums in the city, it was not unique. Riis called it the "foul core" of slums, but it was also "typical."<sup>34</sup> Few other areas—Gotham Court, south of Mulberry Bend, was one; the Lung Blocks of Cherry Street another—had the history of Mulberry Bend. If *How the Other Half Lives* was an exposé that shocked, and perhaps titillated, upper-class New York, it was also a book of history, of tenements and the efforts over half a century to combat their evils. Riis opens *How the Other Half Lives* with a genealogy of the tenement, beginning with the "rear house." Tenement lots were often built up in several stages. Early-eighteenth-century single-family homes were altered

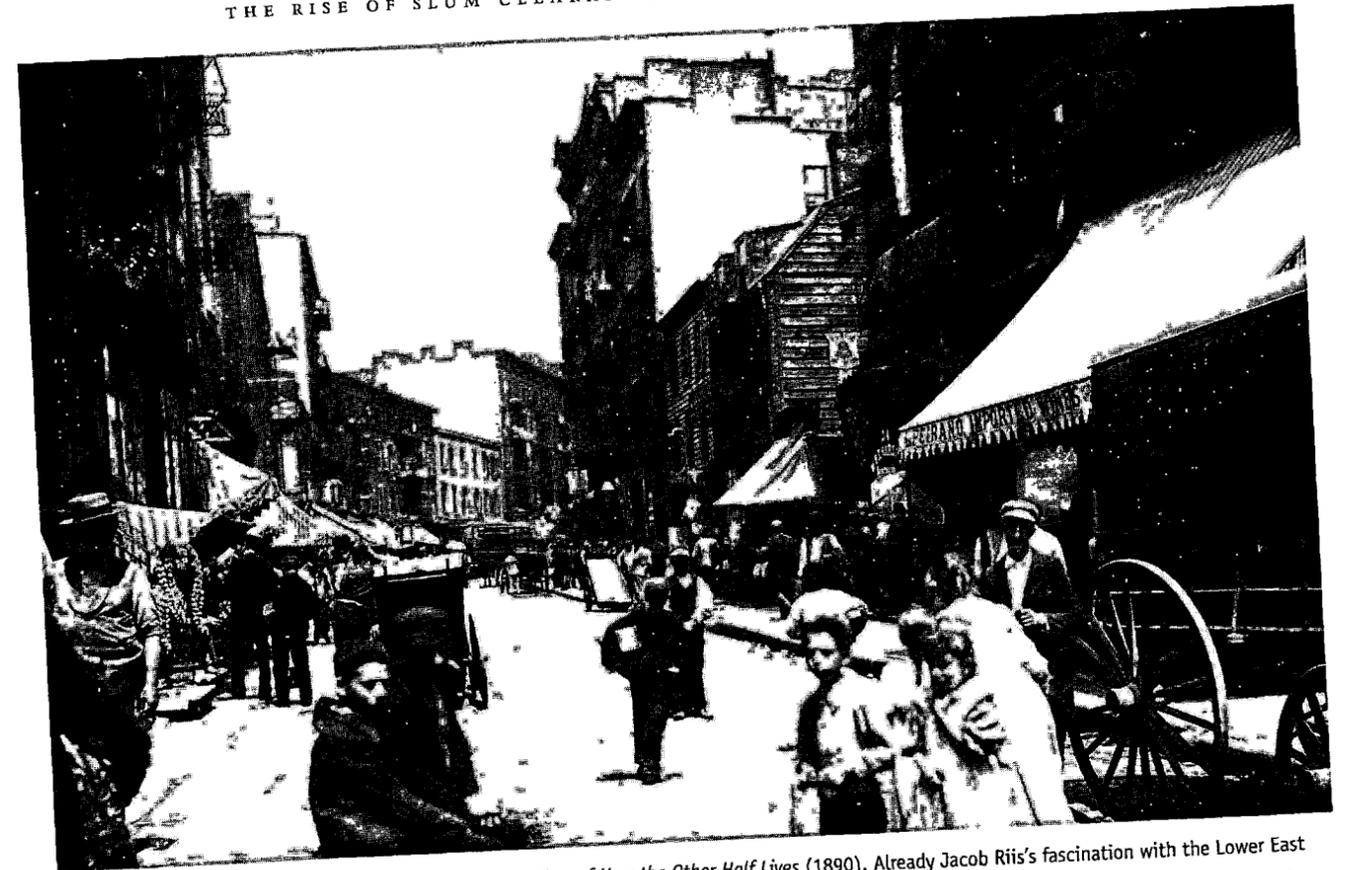


Fig. 3.7. Mulberry Bend, circa 1892, following the publication of *How the Other Half Lives* (1890). Already Jacob Riis's fascination with the Lower East Side was taking hold. Photographs, paintings, postcards, and etchings of the Lower East Side slums made famous by Riis proliferated in the years after *How the Other Half Lives* was published. This image shows the layering of building types in the Lower East Side: the early-nineteenth-century wooden townhouses of merchants and sailors (right, middle), the first tenements of the post-Civil War era, and the six- and even seven-story tenements of the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The Germans, who once dominated the Lower East Side (and were the most populous immigrant group in New York in the nineteenth century), are represented by the Shults Bread delivery wagon, while the newer Italian immigrants who would come to dominate Mulberry Street are in evidence with Peirano wines (right) and the hanging cloves of garlic (left). © Collection of The New-York Historical Society.

or replaced with apartments. Then, the front half of the lot was developed with five- or six-story tenements. The "rear tenements" were soon surrounded on three sides by other tenements and thus became the darkest and dingiest of all. It was in these rear tenements where the worst evils were found and sometimes sought after. "Nothing would probably have shocked their original owners more," wrote Riis, "than the idea of their harboring a promiscuous crowd; for they were the decorous

homes of the old Knickerbockers, the proud aristocracy of Manhattan in the early days."<sup>35</sup> To reformers like Riis, the transformation of the early-nineteenth-century homes of "Knickerbocker" families into some of the worst, most congested housing in the city, was especially poignant; it was a perversion of history. Riis offered a narrative history of the tenements in which the first "rear houses," converted into rented buildings for poor immigrants, led steadily, as immigration increased, to the six-story tenements that were the fabric of the Lower East Side by the end of the century. Like the story of Fifth Avenue, the tenement narrative led from these old houses, to Five Points, to the present crisis, where the most sophisticated and committed of reformers confronted the worst slums yet imaginable. Calling to the "memory of man," Riis insisted that "the old cow-path [Mulberry Street] has never been other than a vast human pig-sty."<sup>36</sup> It was these buildings, the "crazy old buildings, crowded rear tenements," that had become the focus of tenement commissions and housing reformers (figure 3.7).<sup>37</sup>

The rear houses and the old-law tenements, and Mulberry Bend in general, were thus also a problem of historical inheritance, not just one of avaricious landlords, uncivilized immigrants, and corrupt politicians. To reformers, Mulberry Bend was the physical embodiment of the history of slums in New York because it bore the accumulated evils of half a century. Slum clearance has been described as a policy developed as a rational, final response to the problems of inhuman housing for poor people. But closer examination reveals how central the historical symbolism of these tenements was in contributing to their sought-after demise. Cultural understandings of the "leprous houses," images of danger and political unrest, and the construction of the old-law tenement as the scourge to be removed continued to animate housing reform efforts. Just as the recalled and invented memories of Fifth Avenue were utilized to create an image of a successful, "good place" that had to be defended, the awful history of Mulberry Bend—the "foul core" of New York—was repeatedly paraded before the public to offer a diagnosis of a "sick place" that had to be eliminated. It was no accident that the focus was always on efforts to eliminate the oldest and worst slums of the city, the "rear tenements" and so-called old-law tenements that were built previous to the Tenement House Act of 1901, or "new law." These "leprous houses," as Charles Dickens called them in 1842, came to define the two sides in the "battle with the slum" over the next several decades.<sup>38</sup> The power of these places in the public imagination, an imagination powerfully shaped by Riis's photos and writing, would continually reappear to shape not only attitudes but the actual choice of housing development sites and strategies.

The changing powers of city government in the late nineteenth century powerfully shaped the development of slum clearance as policy and ideology. Riis's efforts, beginning in the late 1880s and accelerating until Columbus Park was opened in 1897, revealed for him the problems reformers would face in forcing action from a recalcitrant city government, political machinery, and resistant private owners. Riis quickly recognized the middle ground in which reformers would find themselves, trapped between the inchoate powers of the city government and the fractured but vociferous resistance of real estate owners and speculators. Legal limitations on the powers of government and, perhaps even more important, the political skittishness of city government to initiate widespread slum clearance had created strong resistance to clearing Mulberry Bend.

Among the detailed recommendations of the 1884 Tenement House Commission—a set of very specific recommendations about lot coverage and access to air and light—was a call for the extension of Leonard Street to Pell Street, right through Mulberry Bend, the notorious tenement area. In 1884, the commission had recommended that the street be extended, "as has been recommended in former years."<sup>39</sup> While other recommendations of these commissions dealt with the regulation of present and future tenements, only this one so clearly advocated destruction. The commission's suggestion gained a huge boost when, in 1887, New York State passed the Small Parks Act, which provided aid for the clearing of slums and the creation of parks within poor areas. Over the next decades, New York created a number of parks in Lower Manhattan: Mulberry Bend Park, Seward Park, Hamilton Fish Park (see figure 3.8). By 1888, plans for the park had been drawn up; all that awaited was the purchase of the buildings and the "clearing" of the Bend.

But what appeared to be a relatively simple process became extremely complicated. Over the next seven years, the city battled within itself over the legitimacy of taking property for park uses. It also fought local property owners over the value of the lots. The situation reached farcical proportions when the city took possession of the properties of Mulberry Bend in 1894 but delayed the actual demolition due to lack of funds.<sup>40</sup> The city then became a slumlord, collecting thousands of dollars in rent from inhabitants of the Bend. The following year, Mayor Strong ordered the buildings vacated and then destroyed. Having paid the owners a total of \$1.5 million to leave their properties, the city quickly auctioned off the buildings in June 1895 for a grand total of \$800 to wreckers who would demolish the buildings and remove the ruins within thirty days; some buildings sold for as little as \$1.50.<sup>41</sup> Despite this important step, the muddy lot remained empty for another year, aggravating Riis even further. Only after more pressure from Riis, and the tragic death of several children,

was the Bend finally transformed into a park, which opened to much fanfare in 1897. Ironically, because he had remained a constant critic of the city's incompetence, Riis was not invited to participate in the opening of the park.<sup>42</sup>

Jacob Riis marshaled and defined many of the arguments that would animate slum clearance for the next decades: Progressive belief in the instrumentality of the environment, the ineffectiveness of regulations, and the need for strong governmental intervention. But Riis also recognized how difficult slum clearance would be in New York, despite the small successes he had achieved at Mulberry Bend, in Gotham Court, and in the construction of other small parks. "Doubtless the best would be to get rid of it [the tenement] altogether; but as we cannot, all argument on that score may at this time be dismissed as idle."<sup>43</sup> What would change is that slum clearance would no longer require the enthusiasm of a single, vociferous champion but would become institutionalized in law, in government programs, and in state and federal budgets, driven forward not by revealing photographs but by planning logic. The transformation would take place over two decades of debate among planners, reformers, and other elites over how to rid the city of its slums.

Most nineteenth-century reformers had worked on two fronts in their battle with the slum: demanding improvements to existing tenements and regulating future tenement construction. The numerous commissions established to propose legislation for the improvement of tenement housing produced a long list of regulations through which they hoped to shape the private housing market. The 1879 Tenement House Competition resulted in a series of "model" plans for tenements in the hope of influencing future designs. The great achievement of this competition was to insist that all rooms have access to light and air—hence the air shafts between buildings that created their dumbbell shape. Hailed at the time as a humane answer to the airless, windowless tenements that were being replicated across Manhattan, the "dumbbell" tenements were not much of an improvement, and later they themselves became the scourge of housing reformers. Their air shafts provided very little ventilation, and the regulations had ignored the continuing problems of crowding, sanitation, and fire safety. The work of Jacob Riis and the tenement house commissions of 1894, 1901, and beyond was largely to undo the damage of the dumbbell tenement. Lawrence Veiller declared the dumbbell to be the "curse of our city. . . . [W]e are reaping the evils of that system of the prize plan of 1879, built all over the crowded wards of this city."<sup>44</sup>

The Second Tenement House Committee, which issued its report in 1884, rec-



Fig. 3.8. Essex Street, looking north, 1936. Mulberry Bend Park was followed by the creation of a number of other small parks in the Lower East Side, such as Seward Park (right), bounded by Essex, East Broadway, and Grand Streets. The pushcart peddlers of Hester Street (the cross street in the middle of the photograph) would be removed later that decade by order of Mayor Fiorello La Guardia. Their replacement, the public Essex Street markets, required further demolition of tenements along Essex Street to the north. Collections of the Municipal Archives of the City of New York.

commended design regulations and enforcement powers to address the problems of the 1879 act. This committee sought to require 65 percent maximum coverage (previously, tenements typically covered 80 percent or more of a lot), provision of water supply on each floor, direct light to each room, and the elimination of privies. It also proposed that the city adopt methods of record keeping and inspection that would later be incorporated into a distinct Tenement House Department.<sup>45</sup> Most of these recommendations were not adopted or codified in any way. So in 1894, yet another Tenement House Committee was established by the state legislature. Despite its well-known chairman, Richard Watson Gilder (the poet and editor of *Century* magazine), and its dramatic investigations into the horrible conditions of such landlords as Trinity Church, the 1894 Committee changed little. It expanded the regulations of the 1884 commission and called for necessary enforcement authority to empower the city to uphold its own regulations.

The failures of the 1894 commission provoked a new commission, the 1900 Tenement House Commission, chaired by Robert De Forest and Lawrence Veiller. This commission would be different from all that preceded it. Out of their research, the commission produced a law that fundamentally affected the building of new tenements. The Tenement House Act of 1901 limited lot coverage to 70 percent and required that toilets be installed in each floor of all tenements, new and old, that all rooms have windows, and that fire escapes be installed in all buildings. The extent of these reforms and their enforcement by a newly created Tenement House Department were so fundamental as to make 1901 a dividing line between one age and another, between old-law and new-law tenements.

Riis's advocacy of demolition as creative reform found receptive ears. The ineffectiveness of tenement house regulations (especially the dramatic failure of the 1879 "dumbbell" regulations), the exponential growth in the immigrant populations and consequent expansion of tenement districts beginning in the 1880s, and the powerful example of urban reform in Europe spurred reformers to reconsider their strategies. But while most began to embrace wholesale destruction of tenement buildings as the answer, they did so for different reasons.

The developing calculus of destroying the old in order to build better tenements was deceptively simple. Reformers found themselves at odds with one another over the purpose and effectiveness of tenement destruction and creation. In essence, reformers divided on the purpose of destruction and what creative act would follow demolition of the tenements. One group of reformers, including Felix Adler, founder of the Ethical Culture Society and leader of the Charity Organization Society, advo-

cated destruction as the first step toward public housing. Adler, writing in 1884 as chairman of the Tenement House Commission, stated the new position baldly:

The evils of the tenement house section of this city are due to the estates which neglect the comfort of their tenants, and to the landlords who demand exorbitant rents. The laboring classes are unable to build homes for themselves, and the law of morality and common decency binds the Government to see to it that these houses shall not prove fatal to the lives and morality of the inmates. If the houses are overcrowded the government must interfere. It must compel a reduction of the number of inmates, enforce renovation at the expense of the landlord, and where that is no longer possible, must dismantle the houses and remove them from existence.<sup>46</sup>

Adler insisted that since the private market had failed to provide decent housing for the poor, it was the city's responsibility to step in to aid the helpless. The Charity Organization Society (COS), which essentially served as the social service and welfare wing of municipal government, was the earliest and most vocal advocate of municipal housing. Though it had to wait for years, the COS advocated from the 1890s onward large-scale demolition combined with model tenements. In 1896 and 1900 it sponsored design competitions for model tenements, and its exhibit of the winners in February 1900 was the inspiration for the work of the 1901 new-law commission. Indeed, many of the state and federal commissions on New York City tenements were peopled by COS members, often previous heads of the COS's own permanent tenement house committee.<sup>47</sup>

Other reformers were equally enamored of a vision of large-scale demolition of tenements. E. R. L. Gould, a lecturer on social science and statistics at Johns Hopkins University and expert witness for Gilder's 1894 commission, utilized medical metaphors that pervaded the housing reform discourse when he declared simply: "There is no cure for cancer except the knife. Neither is there any other satisfactory way of dealing with irremediable insanitary premises than to tear them down. . . . The first step in house-reform is to get rid of the bad houses."<sup>48</sup>

During the investigations of the 1894 commission, the philosophy of housing reform through creative destruction was fully embraced for the first time. Gould, Gilder, and the members of the 1894 commission embraced destruction as a creative act in itself. The rear tenements, especially, were "an awful curse, destructive alike to health and morality . . . [and] should be the first to be destroyed, and its disappearance may be made the means of a positive benefit."<sup>49</sup> Adler found himself at odds with the commission because, in his mind, it was focusing too much on destruction and not enough

on building new housing. Adler argued that demolition of tenements without replacing them immediately, at least in another part of the city, was an essentially destructive act, destroying desperately needed shelters. He favored the suburbanization of the population, the building of large model tenements in Harlem and beyond. But as that would not happen in the immediate future, Adler saw the value of parks—open space, fresh air—completely neutralized by the increased crowding in the remaining miserable tenements, while the displaced searched for new housing. In a lively exchange with Richard Watson Gilder, Adler criticized the tendency to tear down tenements and replace them not with needed housing but with parks. Adler saw publicly funded housing as the only alternative if the city was going to destroy people's existing homes. Gilder stridently resisted city-owned housing. He and the commission saw the movement for publicly funded and owned housing as dangerous, "bad principle and worse policy . . . an unjustifiable interference with private enterprise." Public housing would cost too much, would require rents too high for the poor, and would discourage the "natural" development of housing by the private real estate market.<sup>50</sup>

Although Adler and the COS failed to gain support for public housing, their efforts did bear the fruit of new legal powers given to the state Board of Health and the city Department of Buildings. For much of the century, the Board of Health retained limited powers to require demolition of tenements. As early as 1866, the act creating the Metropolitan Board of Health gave that board the power to "condemn buildings that were unfit for habitation" because of physical conditions that would cause disease or other injury.<sup>51</sup> This new power was to be exercised only in extreme situations. These powers were elaborated in laws of 1867 and 1887, but were still restricted to those buildings that threatened immediate harm.

The Tenement House Act of 1895 substantially increased the legal powers of the Board of Health. Expanding the reasons for condemnation and demolition, and providing a coherent process for implementing vacate and condemnation orders, the act gave new impetus to tenement reform by demolition. In what seemed like a minor semantic point, the act authorized the Board of Health to demolish a tenement if it were not considered fit for human habitation. Previously, the building had to be considered a "nuisance" under the law, which did not permit the city to compensate the owners. With the new power came a system of compensation for virtually all owners of condemned property.

Soon after the Tenement House Act of 1895 was passed, the Board of Health initiated a campaign against the fabled "rear tenements." The fertile ground of moral and physical degradation that galvanized reformers lay deep in the interior of tenement blocks, behind the street-facing facades. Considering the currency of rear tenements

in the public imagination (enhanced by tabloid revelations about the condition of Trinity Church's tenement properties), the Board of Health must have felt confident that it could muster public support for an attack at the source of the tenement house evils. But whatever the general support for demolishing rear tenements, when the extent of the board's campaign became apparent, landlords and developers rebelled and challenged the board's powers. In *Health Department v Dassori*, the Court of Appeals held that demolition was to be a last resort, used only when no other method could effectively remove the "nuisance." In a pointed rebuff to the Board of Health's larger goals for tenement reform, the decision cited a previous case, *Myers v Gemmel*, which rejected the notion that owners or renters had a right to light and air.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, one major obstacle to slum clearance was simply the immaturity of the city's financial and legal mechanisms to spur and manage its growth. Condemnation powers were newly discovered and vaguely defined. Indeed, for most of the century, the state Board of Health had final authority over the regulations concerning housing conditions. Municipal bureaucracy was not yet able to handle the monumental tasks of record keeping and regulation enforcement. And, as we have seen, one of the biggest obstacles to a concerted municipal solution for tenement problems was the cost. Any condemnation without compensation—which would alienate the powerful landowners—was politically unacceptable, but any condemnation requiring compensation was fiscally dangerous. The case of Hamilton Fish Park, between Houston, Stanton, Pitt, and Sheriff Streets in the Lower East Side, is illustrative. The city spent almost \$1.7 million to acquire the land in a poor district. To make matters worse, the property was owned by a number of different people, some of whom challenged the awards given by the city.<sup>53</sup>

The question in the legal challenges had seemed to be about semantics—what was a "nuisance"—and the meaning of the 1895 law. But it represented a much larger conflict. The Board of Health was in essence trying to exercise extensive police powers over the built environment, extending its protectorship to encompass far more than elimination of health hazards. The board was trying to radically shape the urban environment through powers of condemnation and demolition. Furthermore, the board, even though it relied on arguments and statistics attesting to the danger of disease in rear tenements, also operated from a position of moral outrage. The reputation of these places as sources of social evil motivated its campaign. What landlords saw as encroaching state power—defining "unfitness" in moral terms as opposed to the more narrow physical definition—the Board of Health saw as a logical, responsible extension of the 1895 law.

The new Tenement House Department that began its work in 1901 was built on

several decades of advocacy for various new elements that would constitute a slum clearance program. But the contradictions inherent in the city's housing reform movement—a call for speedy action along with a hesitancy about government intervention, a dedication to regulations along with the tempting presence of new condemnation powers—would make the translation of rhetorical fascination with the simplicity of the slum clearance solution into coherent public policy far more difficult.

#### “NEW YORK'S REAL NAPOLEON III”

Jacob Riis's success at Mulberry Bend was the culmination of a rising tide of indignation at the conditions of the slums as well as a concerted institutional effort to provide regulatory powers for transforming tenements. But despite the clearing of Mulberry Bend, as well as new legislative imprimatur for tenement destruction, the Lower East Side was not remade by slum clearance in the first two decades of the twentieth century. *De jure* condemnation did not translate into *de facto* power. In the midst of the Mulberry Bend struggle, Riis had written a biting attack on the city:

Let me ask you a simple question in arithmetic, if it took us eight years to get the Mulberry slum made into a dunghill, how long is it going to take us, with present machinery and official energy, to get the two tenement blocks over there, where people are smothering for want of elbow room, made into two parks?<sup>54</sup>

Reformers, government officials, and real estate developers did not divide neatly into three camps, but fractured along several lines. Reformers were split between those urging government-built and -owned public housing, and those seeking only strong regulations. Some government officials advocated extensive clearance as part of an interventionist city-planning ideology; others sought to leave redevelopment up to private business, with regulatory guidance provided by the city. Finally, real estate interests were fractured. Speculators saw benefits accruing to landowners who knew how to exploit the “improvements” made through government-sponsored slum clearance. Small-scale landlords (many of whom were themselves immigrants), on the other hand, depended on the rental income of old-law tenements.<sup>55</sup> The failure of slum clearance to take hold following Riis's advocacy and initial successes, then, was not a result simply of the lack of political will; rather, it reflected a sharp division among the interests of New York's city-building elites.

The failure of the 1895 rear tenement campaign cast a shadow for decades on the strategy of demolishing tenements. The Tenement House Department, established in 1901 by the Tenement House Act, lamented the failure of the board's “crusade” against

the rear tenements. The department's annual report of 1902, essentially its manifesto, states that “the decision of the Court of Appeals . . . has made it unwise for the department to take steps looking toward the destruction of such houses.”<sup>56</sup> Tenements could be “vacated”—evacuated for a period of time—but not permanently demolished, except in extreme circumstances. The department resisted advocates of large-scale demolition and sought to continue the more gradual elimination of tenements.

The Tenement House Department, in its first report, carefully balanced its far-reaching purpose of eliminating all “houses unfit for habitation” with the political resistance on the part of property owners against large-scale demolition. While claiming its task to be enormous and radical—“cleansing of the Augean stable was a small task compared to the cleansing of New York's 82,000 tenement houses . . . [some of which] surpass imagination”—the department carefully avoided zealously applying its newfound powers of condemnation: “Requiring a tenement house to be vacated is so extreme a measure that the department has naturally been unwilling to take this step except in the most serious cases.”<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the department went out of its way to declare a *détente* with owners: “While recognizing that the department was created primarily to protect the health, safety and welfare of those classes of the population who are unable to protect themselves, it was felt that the department should exercise extreme care in enforcing the Tenement House Law, so as not to make it a measure of oppression to tenement house owners.”<sup>58</sup>

In the place of a missionary zeal for demolition, the department substituted a philosophy of destruction through private development. Reformers observed the process of destruction and rebuilding of business and residential buildings in the rest of the city and assumed that the same process would occur in the tenement districts. In its 1914 report, the department noted that

it is not an unusual sight to see a business building, erected only a decade ago, being torn down to give place to a new structure in keeping with modern demands. In the same manner, as soon as the old tenements have become sufficiently unpopular with tenants, wholesale demolition or reconstruction is bound to follow. That time is not far distant in New York City . . . the process of eliminating the old buildings is now not one of law but of competition, which is both surer and speedier in its results.<sup>59</sup>

Riis, too, had recognized that private commercial and real estate development would have to be at the vanguard of the push to remove slums. The transformation of the city “comes so quickly sometimes as to fairly take one's breath away. More than once I have returned, after a few brief weeks, to some specimen rookery in which I was interested, to find it gone and an army of workmen delving twenty feet under-

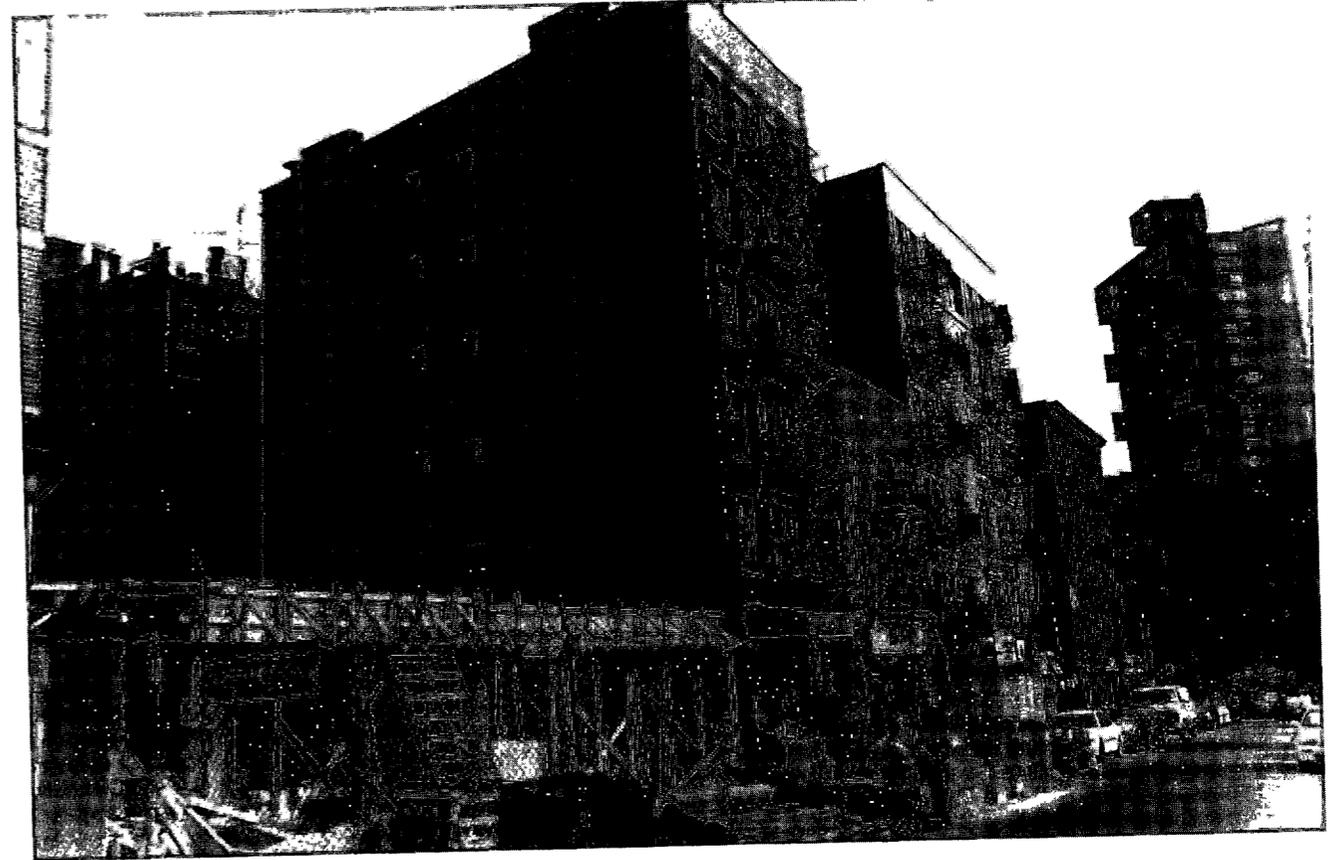
ground to lay the foundation of a mighty warehouse. . . . Business has done more than all other agencies together to wipe out the worst tenements. It has been New York's real Napoleon III, from whose decree there was no appeal."<sup>60</sup> Thus, even Riis, who gave the movement for slum clearance of the worst areas its most powerful visual and rhetorical ammunition, also recognized the power of private real estate in the city.

Tenement house reformers were faced with a perplexing dilemma of their own making. They were committed to righting the wrongs of a private real estate market that had resisted change and profited from horrendous slums. But the reformers were still committed to finding the solution within that very system. Real estate owners and their organizations were skeptical. In the first decade and a half, various lawsuits challenging the Tenement House Department regulations and even the legal legitimacy of the Tenement House Law kept the department in the courts continuously. The most potentially damaging attack came from the United Real Estate Owners' Property Association, an eight-thousand-member group, which fought the law's demand that the "school sinks" and privies be removed and every building be hooked up to a public sewer. It hoped that by highlighting the costs to poor landlords, the department and its regulations might be abolished. Others challenged—in lower courts, successfully—that the definition of "tenement" should be narrowed, to exclude larger apartment buildings and, in Brooklyn, converted townhouses.<sup>61</sup>

Lawrence Veiller, the cochair of the 1900 Tenement House Commission and coauthor of the Tenement House Act of 1901, was the outstanding proponent of this strategy for ridding the city of its old-law tenements. After his work with Robert De Forest on the 1901 law, Veiller followed De Forest to the Tenement House Department as an assistant (his aggressive attacks on landlords prevented him from being appointed by Seth Low as the chair). He left the department when Tammany returned to power in 1904, but continued his housing advocacy, first as chair of the Charity Organization Society's Department for Improvement of Social Conditions and as director of the National Housing Association, which he founded in 1911.<sup>62</sup>

Veiller believed that victory against slums lay in investigation of slum conditions, the "education of the community," and a public exhibit of the results. Out of these efforts would come a movement for "legislation which will remedy . . . the evil conditions discovered, and will prevent their repetition in the future."<sup>63</sup> The National Housing Association, which published *Housing Betterment* (later *Housing*) magazine, was intended to be a clearinghouse of information for communities attempting to enact and enforce tenement laws, and to be an ongoing advocate for the enforcement of those laws.

Veiller was highly critical of government-owned and -operated housing. Although at times he believed government was necessary to provide subsidies and



price stability for the construction industry, overall Veiller believed that government had no place in building and operating public housing.<sup>64</sup> "No government—as governments are constituted in this country—is fitted to manage apartment and tenement houses or other dwelling units in which vast numbers of people reside."<sup>65</sup> As late as 1930, Veiller was proclaiming that "the United States is a land of private enterprise. . . . Government housing plays no part in the solution of its housing problems. The motto of the American people is to keep the Government out of private business and to keep private business out of government."<sup>66</sup> As PWA clearance efforts took hold and a movement in New York and nationwide to create public housing authorities expanded, Veiller had, by the mid-1930s, begun to move with the tide of reformers to embrace slum clearance. Overcrowding was, he admitted, "a problem as obdurate as that of the slum; and in some ways more intractable. . . . Tentative and fragmentary efforts to control it—by bylaws or otherwise—have so far

Fig. 3.9. Mulberry Bend tenements, 1998. Today on Mulberry Street, immediately across from the park, stand "rear tenements" of the type scorned by Jacob Riis and other reformers. (The housing development in the background is Chatham Towers.) The front tenement building at least offered light into front rooms; the rear tenements were almost entirely closed in. Photograph courtesy of Iguana Photo.

signally failed."<sup>67</sup> But he still saw New Deal housing as dangerously piecemeal, and not part of a large regional planning ethos.

Nevertheless, Veiller took some pride in his agency's accomplishments. While many tenement owners and speculative builders and architects had predicted that the Tenement House Law "would absolutely put an end to the building of tenement houses in New York City," in fact, quite the opposite was true. By 1916 one-third of the city's population (1,585,260) was living in new-law tenements; by 1931 the number would be approximately three million. Veiller proudly noted that by 1916 the Advisory Council of Real Estate Interests of New York City praised the law as a "desirable asset in real estate development."<sup>68</sup>

Nonetheless, despite Veiller's optimism, the old-law tenements remained. James Ford, whose *Slums and Housing* is the most comprehensive study of New York's housing conditions, lamented in 1936 that the department had been so hesitant to exercise its police power: "New York is often described as a city continuously in the making, in which comparatively young buildings are ruthlessly destroyed to make way for others of greater height and more modern equipment." In fact, tenements showed "astonishing longevity."<sup>69</sup> In an average year between 1918 and 1935, no more than three or four hundred individual old-law tenements were destroyed.<sup>70</sup> Considering the ultimate goal of ridding the city of the 82,652 old-law tenements that existed in 1900, this portended a hundred-year task. Reformers could not even congratulate themselves on steady, if slow, progress. In the middle-class housing boom of the 1920s, so much low-income housing had been lost that thousands of old-law tenements—having stood vacant for a decade, awaiting the tide of development—were used as housing for the poor once again (see figure 3.9). As late as 1936, some 67,000 of these old-law tenements were still in use.<sup>71</sup> Instead of a concentrated attack, the elimination of old-law tenements took place haphazardly, proceeding only when the "wave of fashion surges in their direction," as with the Upper East Side.<sup>72</sup> Ironically, the poorest neighborhoods experienced the greatest physical stability. For while business buildings marched up the island, and the wealthy repeatedly left their brownstones to be converted or demolished—nearly every decade—the older tenement districts were bypassed.

#### DECONGESTANT: EMBRACING SLUM CLEARANCE IN THE 1920S AND 1930S

A number of factors pushed the city government and reformers toward accepting and promoting a policy of slum clearance that would finally take hold at the end of the 1920s. First was the continuing example of European cities and their dramatic slum

clearance efforts. Between 1880 and 1940, the more radical efforts of Europe—demolishing slums and building public housing—served as examples of both successful and dangerous methods for housing reform. Some observers positively dripped with envy at the powers granted London by the Cross Act of 1875 and its subsequent amendments. The London City Council could declare whole areas clearance districts and thus, with little legal delay, wipe out entire slums, compensating owners little or nothing for their unsanitary buildings. By contrast, the unwillingness to reward slumlords for their buildings in condemnation actions would stall slum clearance efforts in the United States for years.<sup>73</sup> Some reformers saw London's legal tool, duplicated in France and Germany, as a quick way to get rid of unacceptable tenements without costing the city enormous sums.

Lawrence Veiller, even in his protests against public housing, praised the comprehensiveness with which the British—especially in the midst of the post-World War I housing shortage—attacked the problem of slums:

It must be admitted even by one who does not believe in the Government's undertaking enterprises of this kind . . . that the steps which have been taken in these government-built houses are so far in advance of anything that has been done in the past.<sup>74</sup>

Europe continued to be the yardstick by which New Deal efforts were measured. While American efforts at slum clearance were erratic and lacking a comprehensive city plan, European clearance and housing construction efforts were centralized and more efficiently achieved. James Ford lamented the fact that "the contrast between New York practice and English practice in ordinary demolition is one so striking that it cannot be passed by. . . . [I]n England, demolition appears to be brought about with a minimum of difficulty and friction, and no compensation is required if the building is judged by the public authorities to be unfit for human habitation."<sup>75</sup>

Europe also provided examples of model public housing efforts. The investments in public housing and the architectural work of J. J. P. Oud in Holland; Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, and Bruno Taut in Germany; and Le Corbusier in France were remarkable not only because of their innovational design but also for the financial backing for public housing provided by the national governments. European architects offered Americans two types of housing: the "apartment in a garden" approach, consisting of relatively low-rise buildings surrounding a courtyard or series of courtyards, and the "tower in the park," where huge residential towers would allow for extremely high densities, but with instant access to nature.<sup>76</sup>

Organizations began to look at model housing as a policy. As noted previously, the Charity Organization Society saw from the start the dangers of relying on regu-

lations or even slum clearance alone. The COS moved toward an advocacy of model housing that had as an implicit component extensive slum clearance. "Ever since its organization," the COS wrote on the fortieth anniversary of its Tenement House Committee, "the Committee had realized that the problem of housing low income families could not be solved merely by regulation of existing buildings, but that some form of new construction would be necessary to rehouse those who were living in substandard dwellings."<sup>77</sup> In 1896, the COS, along with the Improved Housing Council, had formed the City and Suburban Homes Company to build model low-income housing. With E. R. L. Gould, the economist and federal housing administrator, at its head until his death in 1915, City and Suburban became one of the first and largest producers of model tenements in the country.<sup>78</sup>

The experience of World War I was crucial in ratifying the efforts of model housing groups and suggested, as it did in so many other areas of American life, the possibilities of large-scale investment and coordination of industry by the federal government.<sup>79</sup> Housing production had stalled—only 1,624 dwellings were built in 1919, compared to the high of 54,884 in 1906—and the vacancy rate had declined to virtually zero.<sup>80</sup> The federal government, through the U.S. Shipping Board and the United States Housing Corporation, began building housing for workers in war industries. Although New York gained few housing units from the war experiments, the taboo of government involvement in funding, building, and operating housing was broken. Young architects, such as Clarence Stein and Henry Wright, who would be prominent in New Deal public housing, and housing advocates, such as Edith Elmer Wood, found inspiration in the experience of the war. The federal government had recognized that in certain conditions, and certain places, the private market simply could not provide for all housing needs.<sup>81</sup>

European experience with slum clearance was used by others as a cautionary tale. Riis himself was skeptical—if not of the legitimacy of widespread slum clearance, at least of its practical possibilities in the United States: "The drastic measures adopted in Paris, in Glasgow, and in London are not practicable here on anything like as large a scale."<sup>82</sup> Others faulted European cities for zealous destruction and weak commitment to building new housing. The Tenement House Department noted that the "hardships produced through tardiness in replacement" of housing—the extensive homelessness that it produced—spoke against this type of tenement house reform.<sup>83</sup> Some also remained skeptical of the vast "police" powers exercised by the city governments in England, by which private property was taken with little compensation or appeal. Moving into uncharted areas of eminent domain, these municipal powers seemed at odds with American traditions. Indeed, the Supreme Court had, in the

1893 *Monongahela* case, raised a large obstacle against the exercise of condemnation power by requiring awards to property owners on the basis of fair market value, not on a government-determined amount. But it was also these condemnation powers that had sparked the first slum clearance efforts and that would be at the heart of the renewed slum clearance of the New Deal era. Despite the limitations imposed by *Monongahela*, New York State passed its first "excess condemnation" law in 1913. Excess condemnation was a process whereby the city would take by eminent domain an area "in excess" of what was absolutely required for a public project—a bridge approach, or street widening, for example—and then sell off the land to private developers. Excess condemnation allowed the city to recoup some of the cost of the public works project, get rid of noxious tenements, and plan for new uses.<sup>84</sup> The state law was passed in 1913, but the city did not use the right of excess condemnation for the exclusive act of slum clearance and park development until 1927.

Specific housing models and legal changes occurred within the rise of the modern city-planning movement, which boosted the idea of planning by destruction. New York produced some of the movement's most powerful proponents and was the site of its first experiments. Following Daniel Burnham's famous dictum from 1893, "make no little plans," architects and members of the young planning profession began imagining a wholesale rearrangement of Manhattan's gridiron layout. Comprehensive city plans—George B. Post's 1899 plan for Lower Manhattan was succeeded by the 1904 and 1907 plans of the New York City Improvement Commission and, later, the plans of the Regional Plan Association—all proposed to defeat the grid and its inefficiencies by slicing through large boulevards and laying out public plazas.<sup>85</sup> With the growth of automobile traffic, the need for more efficient traffic movement was paramount. Planners devised widened or new cross-cutting avenues through the Lower East Side. Although New York never achieved the City Beautiful ideals of interlocking boulevards and public buildings, the movement to reorganize and beautify the city brought extensive street widenings in the Lower East Side and the construction of the Williamsburg and Manhattan Bridges.

The more abstract result of this array of developments—lessons of Europe, new legal powers, federal experimentation in World War I, the rise of city and regional planning—was to give reformers a new sense of their abilities and a new set of tools to intervene in the real estate market. In essence, it represented a new notion of how places, whether they be individual homes, neighborhoods within the city, or the whole metropolitan region, were built and rebuilt. It provided, all at once, new tools and rhetoric both for protecting places as they were—such as on Fifth Avenue—and radically, speedily remaking them.

In New York's Lower East Side, the movement toward slum clearance gained intensity because of economic changes in the 1920s and then the Great Depression. In the wake of a rapid construction boom in the 1920s, the Lower East Side declined precipitously in population, from a high of 530,000 to 250,000 in 1930. Miles of new-law housing in Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx, close to the expanding network of subways and elevated trains, lured a prosperous working class.<sup>86</sup> Lower East Side landlords found themselves holding property in an area that lost over half of its population. The only solution to their financial problems was either to transform their property into middle-income housing or commercial buildings. Both of these solutions were aided by government investment.

Ironically, the first major slum clearance and public housing experiments sponsored by the PWA occurred outside of the Lower East Side, in Williamsburg and in Harlem. But a number of reformers urged a return to the Lower East Side, the "foul core" of New York's slums. Mary Simkhovitch, for example, the founder of Greenwich House and a member of the first Housing Authority, argued that "the public will not be with us unless slum clearance is done"—and done in the Lower East Side.<sup>87</sup> The clearance efforts in the Lower East Side in the late 1920s and 1930s—including the widening of Allen Street, the creation of Sara Delano Roosevelt Park between Chrystie and Forsyth streets (figure 3.10), and the building of the Amalgamated Dwellings along Grand Street—were the product of many forces. These forces included not only a rational evaluation of conditions, as well as the cynical advocacy of landowners in the area, but also the indictment of memory.

What would replace the lost homes? The first tentative steps in the direction of public housing were taken under the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC). One of only two projects undertaken by RFC, Knickerbocker Village (designed by John S. Van Wart), was completed in 1933. For thirty years, the "Lung Block," located in the Lower East Side between Cherry, Catherine, Monroe, and Market Streets, was on the top of housing reformers' "most wanted" lists and certainly provided ammunition for the COS in its bid to have slums demolished rather than "improved" through regulations. As Jacob Riis described the "Lung Block" in *How the Other Half Lives*: "In the shadow of the great stone abutments [of the Brooklyn Bridge] the old Knickerbocker houses linger like ghosts of a departed day. . . . The years have brought to the old houses unhonored age, a querulous second childhood that is out of tune with the time, their tenants, the neighbors. . ." (see figure 3.11).<sup>88</sup> Robert De Forest, the head of the 1901 Tenement House Commission, took aim at the Lung Block in 1903 as earlier reformers had pointed to the Five Points, or Gotham Court, or Mulberry Bend: "I know of no tenement house block in this city which is so bad from a



sanitary point of view, or from a criminal point of view. Every consideration of public health, morals and decency require that the buildings on this block be destroyed at an early date."<sup>89</sup> For the next thirty years, the new Tenement House Department made one of its priorities the improvement of the Lung Block tenements.

Fred French, one of New York's biggest developers, assumed the task in the spirit of both public service and private gain. Knickerbocker Village revealed how the conflict between reformers and property owners could be mended with the introduction of the federal government into the housing business. Suddenly, slum clearance meant new profits. French gleefully shared with Princeton students in 1934 the discovery that destruction was as profitable as construction:

Our company, strangely enough, was the first business organization to recognize that profits could be earned negatively as well as positively in New York real estate—not only by constructing new buildings but by destroying, at the same time, whole areas of disgraceful and disgusting sores. These sores, for more than a century, have been festering in our very midst, festering with disease and, what is worse, perhaps, festering with crime.<sup>90</sup>

Fig. 3.10. Forsyth Street looking northward from Grand Street, 1931. In one of the most dramatic slum clearance efforts, the blocks between Chrystie and Forsyth Streets, from the Manhattan Bridge to Houston Street, were demolished to make way for public housing. The failure of that effort left the neighborhood with a long parkway, Chrystie-Forsyth Park. Collections of the Municipal Archives of the City of New York.



Fig. 3.11. Jacob Riis, *Old House on Cherry Street, "The Cradle of the Tenement,"* circa 1890. With this and other photographs, Riis footnoted the history of the Lower East Side as the nineteenth-century home of the middle-class merchants and sea captains. The Jacob A. Riis Collection, Museum of the City of New York.

As mentioned earlier, the remains of the Lung Block were finally carted off to provide nourishment to the New York harbor fish for decades after it was torn down.

Only in the 1930s, when the federal government became a crucial player, did slum clearance become the dominant method of improving New York's housing stock. The Depression and the subsequent New Deal legislation brought a fundamental restructuring of the system of housing in New York and across the country. With government funding and encouragement, New York established the New York City Housing Authority in 1934 and designated large areas for demolition and new housing construction (see figure 3.12). First Houses, built in 1935 at Avenue A and East Third Street, were the first products of the New York City Housing Authority; they were soon followed by massive projects such as East River Houses, the Corlears Hook renewal area,



Fig. 3.12. Thomas Airviews, Stuyvesant Town, 1943. Robert Moses and city planners of the 1930s introduced a far more radical version of reform through destruction. Stuyvesant Town, which lies on eighteen blocks bounded by Fourteenth and Twentieth Streets, First Avenue and C, was built by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in 1943 with slum clearance incentives from the state. Today it houses some twenty thousand people. © Collection of The New-York Historical Society.

and Williamsburg Houses. The commitment of the federal government to low-income housing construction came with the Housing Act of 1937. In 1937 alone, some 37,000 apartment units were torn down throughout the city. By 1938, "the greatest elimination of Old Law housing in the city's history had occurred."<sup>91</sup> Although old-law tenements persist to this day in the Lower East Side, by the end of the 1930s, the city had gone a long way toward winning the first round of the "battle of the slum."<sup>92</sup>

#### CONCLUSION: "CATAclySMIC" REFORM

In 1938, as old-law tenements were being torn down at a pace that would have pleased Jacob Riis, the Federal Writer's Project looked back to the first slum clearance site:

Every foot of the "Bend" reeked with abject misery, cruelty, shame, degradation and crime. By day a purgatory of unrelieved squalor, at night the "Bend" became an inferno tenanted by the very dregs of humanity. . . . Cleaning of the district was impossible; still less any kind of reclamation. It had to be destroyed utterly.<sup>93</sup>

It had taken Jacob Riis's eloquence and a decade-long campaign to force an antiquated municipal machinery to finally remove the slums of Mulberry Bend. For much of the early twentieth century, housing reformers were forced to use a slow-paced method of ridding the city of its tenements: the cyclical workings of the private speculative real estate market.

What the New Deal achieved, and urban renewal experts like Robert Moses perfected in the 1950s, was a means of speeding up the process of slum clearance. Through governmental leadership, a convergence of the interests of reformers, developers, and landlords was achieved and the bulk of the old-law tenements eliminated.<sup>94</sup> In the Lower East Side, the government intervened to facilitate change by providing fuel for the process of creative destruction of the hated tenements. Where private real estate developers would not be moved, the local housing authorities using federal dollars took over the job of removing and replacing the tenements. Distilled to its essence, the story of slum clearance is about managing the pace of creative destruction in the city. On Fifth Avenue, creative destruction had to be cooled to the point of freezing in order to protect what had become an important place for the city's past and future. On the Lower East Side, the legends and memories of reformers fueled the engine that would bring down most of the old-law tenements.

Jane Jacobs would later lead the revolt against the ideology of urban renewal. In her 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs called these massive interventions of government into the urban landscape "cataclysmic." They

brought rapid, decisive, and irreversible physical and social change to neighborhoods previously characterized by an "organized complexity."<sup>95</sup> Already in the 1930s key critics had warned of the effects of these interventions. For example, James Ford, writing in the midst of the New Deal housing efforts, saw that the slum clearance efforts for which reformers had long hoped were often deleterious to cohesion of the city. Piecemeal demolitions, such as the elimination of Mulberry Bend, were frustrating to the larger vision of a planned city:

The wiping out of old tenements . . . has been uneven in its effects. Some new structures have obliterated all evidence of their predecessors. Other clearance presents an untidy appearance on widened thoroughfares or has left gashes and raw wounds where buildings are only partly demolished.<sup>96</sup>

Jacobs also built on a long, if submerged, tradition of lamenting the rapid transformation of the city even if it eliminated some of the most horrible of housing. Indeed, Jacobs would lead a counterrevolution, a "modernism of the streets," which celebrated the very places condemned by reformers.<sup>97</sup> Even as the tools of urban renewal were being assembled, from Jacob Riis's campaign down to the establishment of the New York City Housing Authority in 1934, there were murmurs of discontent—and not only by those whose homes were being torn down—at the destruction wrought by these efforts. Even as Mulberry Bend was to be demolished, some artists and intellectuals suggested that something would be lost. Edward Townsend, whose *Daughter of the Tenements* (1895) was a widely read classic of the tenement-life genre, scoffed at the zealous destroyers of the picturesque:

In the course of human events, as they are directed and advanced by municipal energy, Mulberry Bend is to be converted into a park. For the sunlight and air so introduced into that neighborhood we shall all feel appropriately proud of our share in the achievement, yet I cannot but regret that even with all the deliberation our rulers may exercise in this matter, the transformation of the Bend into the park will have taken place before any American painter shall have found time from working up his "Naples sketches" and elaborating his "scenes from Cairo streets" into ambitious canvases, to step over into the "Bend" and preserve its distinctive color and action for those of us who care. He might even conceal his indiscretion by labeling his picture "Street Scene in an Italian Town," and sell it, i' faith!<sup>98</sup>

Other writers, like William Dean Howells in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889) and James Huneker in *The New Cosmopolis* (1915), made almost identical lamentations, including the exhortation for painters to preserve the memory of the tenement areas. Indeed, already in 1915 Huneker was suggesting to those who ventured to the myth-

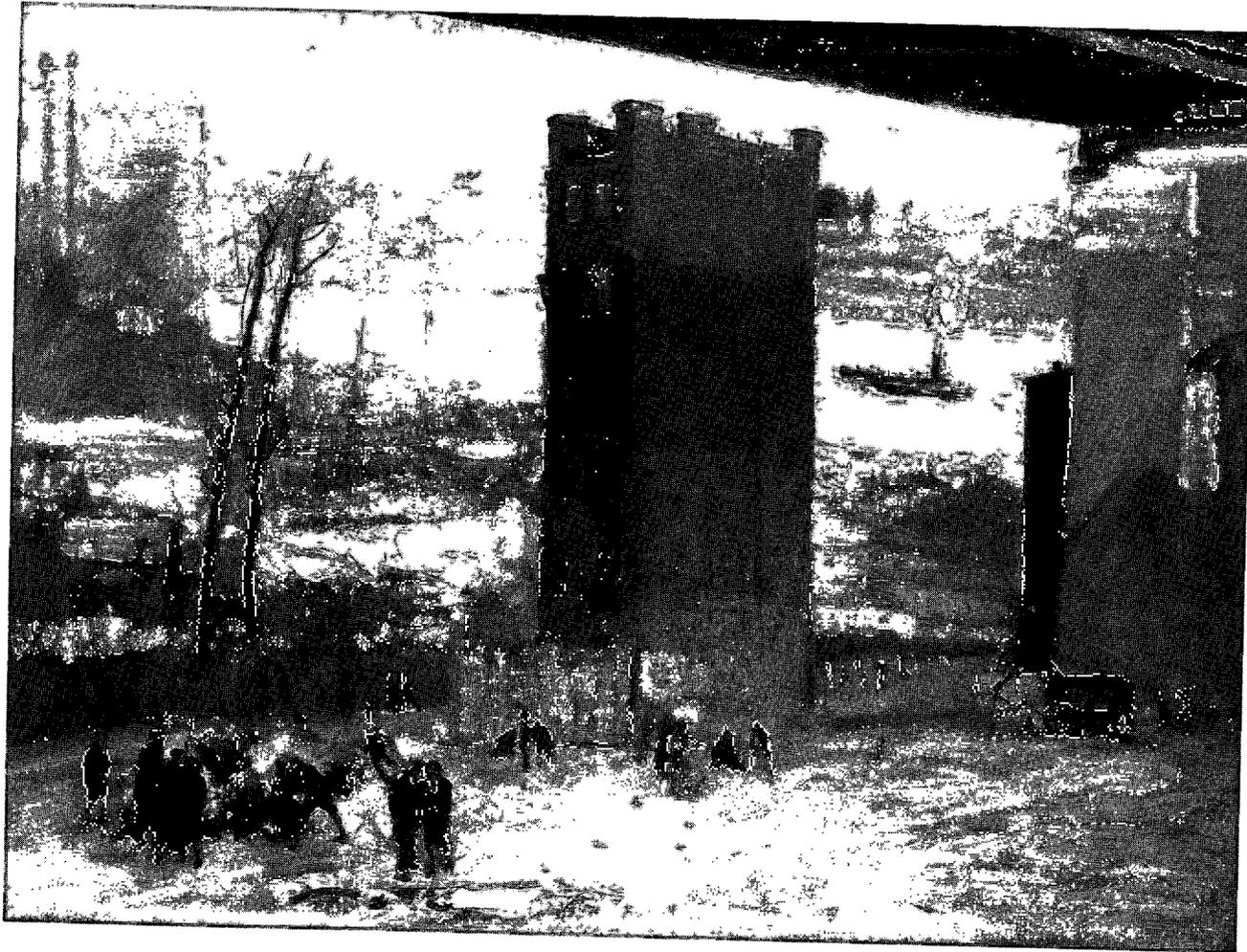


Fig. 3.13. George Wesley Bellows, *The Lone Tenement*, 1909. Bellows looked below the technological marvel of the Blackwell's Island Bridge (now known as the Queensboro Bridge) to the destruction it wrought on the immigrant neighborhood. Chester Dale Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

ical Lower East Side that there was “no more East Side . . . it [is] only a fable.”<sup>99</sup> Even Jacob Riis believed the Bend “had its picturesque, its humanly interesting side”:

With the perpetual market on street and sidewalk, its crowds of raven-haired women, bright kerchiefs adding grateful touches of gayety to the sombrest of garbs, its celebration of communal saints (imported, not domestic) on the flimsiest of pretexts, it was a study for an artist always; yet I never saw one there.<sup>100</sup>

Contemporary artists, especially those of the “Ashcan” school, flocked to the Lower East Side, drawn to a place in Manhattan where they hoped to find the irrational, the fantastical, and the chaotic (see figures 3.13 and 3.14).<sup>101</sup>



Fig. 3.14. A lone tenement on Essex Street between Stanton and East Houston awaits demolition to make way for the Essex Street Market, 1935. A quarter century later, similar images would be found throughout the Lower East Side, as public housing and slum clearance were embraced by city planners. Collections of the Municipal Archives of the City of New York.

As the Lower East Side's population declined rapidly in the 1930s, with many of the immigrants who had first settled there having fled to northern Manhattan, the other boroughs, and beyond, writers began to celebrate or at least memorialize life in the "immigrant quarter." In the works of Michael Gold and Anzia Yezierska, Abraham Cahan and Henry Roth, the memory of the Lower East Side was being "collected."<sup>102</sup> Michael Gold began his classic *Jews Without Money* (1930), to name just one example, with a memory: "I can never forget the East Side street where I lived as a boy. It was a block from the notorious Bowery, a tenement canyon hung with fire-escapes, bed-clothing, and faces." At the heart of virtually every tale of the immigrant East Side was the tenement itself, the historical starting point for the group's history. "Every tenement home was a Plymouth Rock," declared Gold.<sup>103</sup> The nostalgia for neighborhoods cleared to make way for new bridges and parks or, less commonly, public housing, grew in intensity as slum clearance and urban renewal accelerated. Alfred Kazin, writing about an urban renewal area that was once his neighborhood, noted that

despite my pleasure in all this space and light in Brownsville . . . I miss her old, sly, and withered face. I miss all those ratty little wooden tenements, born with the smell of damp in which there grew up how many school teachers, city accountants, rabbis, cancer specialists, functionaries of the revolution, and strong-arm men for Murder, Inc.<sup>104</sup>

Thus, by the end of the Depression, the slums of New York—and the most famous slum area of all, the Lower East Side—became more important as a place of memory and less a living neighborhood. The slums had become, in Pierre Nora's terms, a *lieux de memoire*, a disembodied site of memory—and no longer a *milieu de memoire*, a living setting for a community's past. This trajectory would continue in the post-World War II era, and the Lower East Side would grow as a place of nostalgic tourism, usually for those who had never lived there.<sup>105</sup>

At the same time as immigrants and their children were memorializing the immigrant history of the Lower East Side, promoters of urban renewal were resurrecting a different, more distant past of the neighborhood and its tenements. Those who sought to draw capital and government investment into the neighborhood (most notably the East Side Chamber of Commerce) recalled the glorious seventeenth- and eighteenth-century histories of the Lower East Side as home to the great founders of the city—Delancey, Rutgers, Roosevelt—and therefore worthy of a better future to redeem an appalling present. The East Side Chamber of Commerce advertised the places where George Washington had lived (1 Cherry Street) or where famous families such as the Roosevelts had their first lands in America. The Chamber proudly reported that an enormous amount of real estate on the Lower East Side was owned

by descendants of some of the "original" families, including names such as Astor, Goelet, Cheeseborough, and Fish.<sup>106</sup> "Nowhere in all the realty records of America would one find so many distinguished and socially prominent owners of a huge community's property as one does on the lower East Side." Virtually every issue of the *Chamber News* in the 1930s contained historical descriptions of sites in the East Side or personal reminiscences. "Be proud of the lower East Side," the *Chamber News* proclaimed. "It has as fine a history as any of our original colonies."<sup>107</sup>

Ironically, it was often the oldest buildings of all—the "foul core" of the Lower East Side—to which the boosters looked for their valuable history. The rear tenements, after all, were often townhouses of merchants dating back to the late eighteenth century, near descendants of the families whose names appeared on street signs—Rutgers, Delancey, Forsyth. Even Lillian Wald, the reformer who defined her work by the horrors of the Lower East Side, noted the historic homes she occupied. The Henry Street Settlement was housed in two early-nineteenth-century townhouses, she wrote, that "still bore evidences of its bygone social glory" deserving of "the restorer's touch."<sup>108</sup>

It was to the romanticizing of the tenements that Robert Moses reacted with such venom. In 1956, at a celebration of the United Settlement House's seventieth anniversary (just around the time Joseph Mitchell was tracing the contributions of the bricks from Cherry Street), Moses mocked the notion that the slums and the Lower East Side had produced great artists for the reasons of their density and communal life. Some "social scientists," Moses snidely noted, "say that since the slums have bred so many remarkable people, and even geniuses, there must be something very stimulating in being brought up in them." They make the "slum sound romantic." In fact, the "slum is still the chief cause of urban disease and decay," he declared. "It was bequeathed to us by unconscionable rascals . . . the old enemies are still with us." Moses derided any nostalgia for the destroyed swatches of tenements that surrounded the Settlement House on Rivington Street. Characterizing the Lower East Side as an "outpost," a "jungle," and a "waste," Moses reaffirmed the ultimate dream: to "eradicate" the "irredeemable rookeries."<sup>109</sup>

But even as Moses spoke, a countermovement was developing to challenge this dominant philosophy of housing reform through slum clearance. This movement had its roots not only in contemporary battles but in a growing concern with the historic fabric of the city that had begun over a half century earlier, as Manhattan's elites became increasingly preoccupied with the preservation or destruction of the physical symbols of the past.

link themselves, however weakly or fleetingly, to the past has always been through attachments to relatively stable landscapes. Constant change made this connection highly problematic, but also potentially useful. Some saw an opportunity to sever the restrictive ties the past imposed. The city builders of New York, however, struggled to make history a value and a tool in the marketplace for space. In their effort to "make time visible," as Lewis Mumford said, they knowingly or unknowingly helped to fuel Manhattan's creative destruction.

## NOTES

### CHAPTER ONE

1. Henry James, *New York Revisited* (1906; reprint, New York: Franklin Square Press, 1994), p. 34.
2. *Diary of Philip Hone* (1845), quoted in William Cole, ed., *Quotable New York: A Literary Companion* (New York: Penguin, 1992), p. 50; and Luc Sante, *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* (New York: Random House, 1991), p. x.
3. David Ward and Olivier Zunz, "Between Rationalism and Pluralism: Creating the Modern City," in *The Landscape of Modernity: Essays on New York City, 1900-1940*, ed. Ward and Zunz (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1992), p. 3.
4. Dramatic examples of destruction—natural and human—such as the Chicago fire of 1871 and the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, the radical replanning of Paris under Baron Haussmann, and the urban renewal efforts of Robert Moses are highlights in the history of cities and their physical transformation; they have also proven to be fruitful opportunities for historians to study social change. My focus, however, is on the "ordinary" sources and effects of creative destruction. For examples of some fine works focusing on destruction in the city, see Christine Meisner Rosen, *The Limits of Power: Great Fires and the Process of City Growth in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Karen Sawislak, "Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Fire, 1867-1874" (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Ross Miller, *American Apocalypse: The Great Fire and the Myth of Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); David H. Pinkney, *Napoleon III and the Rebuilding of Paris* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958); and Carl Smith, *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). There is an extensive literature on the San Francisco earthquake, as well as important floods such as those in Galveston, Texas, and Johnstown, Pennsylvania, at the turn of the century.
5. See Joseph A. Schumpeter, "The Process of Creative Destruction," chap. 7 in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942; reprint, New York: Harper and Row, 1976).
6. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), p. 99.
7. In doing so I am building on a generation of work by urban geographers, mostly notably David Harvey, who have explored the urban process under capitalism. These scholars have "respatialized" urban studies, showing how urban space itself becomes a reflection and generator of capitalist innovation, and is a powerful engine shaping social and cultural development. I use this theoretical work to explore a particular historical moment in the history of capitalist urbanization. For an excellent overview, see David Harvey, *The Urban Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989). For an overview of recent Marxist studies of the city, including the work of Harvey and Manuel Castells, see Ira Katznelson, *Marxism and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

8. Aldous Huxley, "Usually Destroyed," in *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow, and Other Essays* (New York: Harper, 1956), p. 225.

9. In his path-breaking *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), Carl E. Schorske argues that in their efforts to be free of the past and its constraints, artists, intellectuals and politicians of *fin de siècle* Vienna were in fact more deeply engaged in the past than ever before.

10. Quoted in Nathan Silver, *Lost New York* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), p. 9. Ironically, for some, such as E. B. White, the city's essence was to be found in the very invisibility of time, in the absence of physical links to particular moments in the past. Paradoxically, White argues, this quality gave Manhattan a greater claim on the past: The city "carries on its lapel the unexpungeable odor of the long past, so that no matter where you sit in New York you feel the vibrations of great times and tall deeds, of queer people and events and undertakings" ("Here Is New York," in *Essays of E. B. White* [New York: Harper, 1977], p. 118).

11. For an excellent discussion of the changes in the perception of space and time wrought by technological developments, see Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Space and Time* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

12. Although the concept of collective memory—both the notions of an identifiable collective community and of fixed memories—is fraught with definitional potholes, a number of historians have found it a fruitful area of study. The starting point of such a study is the work of Maurice Halbwachs, who remains the most influential theorist on the subject. For an overview of his work see Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). See also Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991); David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and "Memory and American History: A Special Issue," *Journal of American History* 75 (March 1989): pp. 1117-1280.

13. In *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), William Cronon uses "second nature" to describe an "artificial nature that people erect atop first nature," the original prehuman nature (p. xvii).

14. Several fine recent works on the social and political history of New York City's physical development at the turn of the century anchor this book. Some of the most useful include David Hammack, *Power and Society: Greater New York at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); John Mollenkopf, ed., *Power, Culture, and Place: Essays on New York City* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1988); Ward and Zunz, eds., *The Landscape of Modernity*; and William R. Taylor, *In Pursuit of Gotham: Culture and Commerce in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

The closest historical work to my own is David Moisseiff Scobey, "Empire City: Politics, Culture, and Urbanism in Gilded-Age New York" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1989). Focusing on New York City in the Gilded Age, Scobey describes the first great wave of creative destruction that accompanied New York's rise to prominence from the middle of the nineteenth century through the first three decades of the twentieth. He argues that the upheavals of New York City's economic and social life were not "growing pains" or "natural" symptoms of excessive growth that would be progressively (and progressively) ameliorated by a rising civic consciousness, but rather the inherent, unavoidable flip side of capitalistic prosperity and economic expansion. The "uptown utopias"—the aristocratic residential areas of the Upper East and West Sides—were the direct response by elites to the chaos of Lower Manhattan.

15. The population of New York City grew from 2.33 million in 1910 to 7.89 million in 1950. See George Lankevitch, *A History of New York City* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p. 146.

16. "The Building of New York," *Architecture* 56 (December 1927): p. 324, quoted in Robert A. M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, and Thomas Mellins, *New York 1930: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Two World Wars* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), p. 19.

17. In a recent architectural history of the city in this era, Stern, Gilmartin, and Mellins note that

"for the first time in the city's history, many significant buildings were demolished to make way for buildings of lesser distinction" (*New York 1930*, p. 19).

18. William Dean Howells, *Their Wedding Journey* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1871), p. 27.

19. Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), p. 17.

20. White, "Here Is New York," p. 121.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 118. The population of New York City in 1910 was 41 percent foreign born. Lankevitch, *A History of New York City*, p. 146.

22. White, "Here Is New York," p. 121.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

24. Ford Madox Ford, *New York Is Not America* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1927), p. 107.

25. Daniel J. Boorstin, "The Landscape of Democracy," in *Democracy and Its Discontents: Reflections on Everyday America* (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 68.

26. "The Vanishing of New York's Social Citadels: Four Great Establishments on Fifth Avenue That Have Unwillingly Given Up the Ghost," *Vanity Fair* 25 (October 1925): p. 51, quoted in Stern, Gilmartin, and Mellins, *New York 1930*, p. 20.

27. Gutzon Borglum, "Our Ugly Cities," *North American Review* 228 (November 1929): pp. 548-53, quoted in Stern, Gilmartin, and Mellins, *New York 1930*, p. 19.

28. Despite the enormous theoretical achievements of David Harvey and other urban geographers, their work has often verged toward a deterministic view of urbanization that leaves little room for the influence of cultural values on the understanding and transformation of place. The focus on New York City is an implicit argument that it is only through a concrete example of a single city that the process of capitalist urbanization can be studied. Harvey himself returned, in a recent work, to the close study of Paris under Haussmann. See Harvey, *Consciousness and the Urban Experience: Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

29. The absence of a separate chapter titled "the rise of city planning" is a conscious choice, reflecting my own critique of the historiography of city planning. First, city planning does not "rise" from nothing in this era; a number of recent works have made plain the truth that city planning has long roots in the nineteenth century, dating at least to Olmsted and even before. Second, the city-planning movement was hardly unified in approach and in its supporters. My argument is reflected in the fact that "city planning" is addressed in each chapter: Each case study describes a different set of efforts to shape the city according to rational, planned means. See, for example, Scobey, "Empire City"; and David Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape: The Redefinition of City Form in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

30. See "Le Corbusier Scans Gotham's Towers," *New York Times Magazine*, 3 Nov. 1935.

31. Le Corbusier, *When the Cathedrals Were White: A Journey to the Country of Timid People*, trans. Francis E. Hyslop Jr. (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947), p. 45. See also Silver, *Lost New York*, p. 11.

32. Le Corbusier, *When the Cathedrals Were White*, p. 45.

#### CHAPTER TWO

1. Henry James, *New York Revisited* (1906; reprint, New York: Franklin Square Press, 1994), p. 45.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

3. Fred Rothermell, *Fifth Avenue: Twenty-Eight X-Rays of a Street* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1930). "Spine of Gotham" is the title of the frontispiece poem.

4. Especially insightful are Charles Lockwood, *Manhattan Moves Uptown: An Illustrated History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976); M. Christine Boyer, *Manhattan Manners: Architecture and Style, 1850-1900* (New York: Rizzoli, 1985); Ronda Wist, *On Fifth Avenue: Then and Now* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1992); Kate Simon, *Fifth Avenue: A Very Social History* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978); and Theodore James Jr., *Fifth Avenue* (New York: Walker and Company, 1971).

5. Elizabeth Blackmar, "Uptown Real Estate and the Creation of Times Square," in *Inventing Times Square: Commerce and Culture at the Crossroads of the World, 1880-1939*, ed. William R. Taylor (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1991), p. 53.

6. Quotations from Louise Frances Reynolds, *The History of a Great Thoroughfare: A Few Facts Concerning Fifth Avenue and Its Adjacent Streets* (New York: Thoroughfare, 1916), no pagination; "The Fifth Avenue," *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide* (hereafter cited as RERBG), 15 June 1878, pp. 515-16, quoted in Robert A. M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, and John Massengale, *New York 1900: Metropolitan Architecture and Urbanism, 1890-1915* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983), p. 307; "Middle Fifth Avenue: The Evolution of the New Piccadilly," RERBG, 20 April 1901, p. 694; A. C. David, "The New Fifth Avenue," *Architectural Record*, July 1907, p. 2; and J. F. L. Collins, *Both Sides of Fifth Avenue* (New York: J. F. L. Collins, 1910), p. 50.

7. The 1993 confrontation between the organizers of the 25th Anniversary of the 1969 Stonewall Riot and Mayor Giuliani over the celebration's parade route suggests how important the image of Fifth Avenue remains. A renegade parade defied the city's agreed-upon route up First Avenue, and instead proceeded up Fifth. Herbert Muschamp, the architectural critic, astutely notes the impression of Fifth Avenue today as being "at once privileged and doomed" in "Seven Miles with the Power to Transform," *New York Times* (hereafter cited as NYT), 25 June 1995, sec. H, p. 34.

8. For an exemplary theoretical discussion and historical account of consumers' separation from the agricultural products they consume, see William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991).

9. For a discussion of legal rulings on land valuation, see Joel Schwartz, *The New York Approach: Robert Moses, Urban Liberals, and Redevelopment of the Inner City* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993), chap. 1.

10. "Imageability" is the term used by Kevin Lynch in his classic work on the design of cities, *Image of the City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960).

11. I discuss the problem of locating the "birth" of city planning in chapter 1.

12. David, "The New Fifth Avenue," p. 4.

13. Ibid. Numerous such "lists" were published during this period. See, for example, American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society, *Twenty-Fourth Annual Report* (1919), pp. 154-55; and William Pedrick, "Fifth Avenue To-Day" in *Fifth Avenue Old and New, 1824-1924*, ed. Henry Collins Brown (New York: Fifth Avenue Association, 1924), pp. 99-100. Pedrick noted that the value of property along Fifth Avenue from Fortieth to Eighty-sixth Streets had grown from \$397,000 in 1841 to \$259,611,000 in 1924. The 1924 figure did not include, he quickly added, the \$53 million of property exempt from taxes, such as the New York Public Library (\$23,600,000).

14. Measurements from insurance maps in George W. and Walter S. Bromley, *Atlas of the City of New York, Borough of Manhattan* (Philadelphia: G. W. Bromley and Co., 1902, 1921, 1930). For an outstanding visual documentation of the Avenue, see *Fifth Avenue, New York, from Start to Finish* (New York: Welles and Co., 1911).

15. "Middle Fifth Avenue: The Evolution of the New Piccadilly," RERBG, 10 April 1901, p. 694.

16. Reynolds, *History of a Great Thoroughfare*. As early as 1855, Henry Tappan, the chancellor of the University of Michigan, had suggested that Fifth Avenue would develop this way: "The city has not only advanced in magnitude, it has also been rebuilt. The palaces of the last generation were forsaken and turned into boarding-houses, then pulled down and replaced by warehouses. He who erects his magnificent palace on Fifth Avenue to-day, has only fitted out a future boarding-house, and probably occupied the site of a future warehouse." Quoted in Seymour Toll, *Zoned America* (New York: Grossman, 1969), p. 83.

17. David Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape: The Redefinition of City Form in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), p. 78.

18. Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape*, p. 64, quoting Henry Tappan.

19. Stern, Gilmartin, and Massengale, *New York 1900*, p. 307.

20. Burton Hendrick, "The New Fifth Avenue," *Metropolitan Magazine* 23 (1905): p. 244.

21. In 1927, for example, only five new single-family homes were built in Manhattan. Stern, Gilmartin, and Massengale, *New York 1900*, p. 444.

22. Theoretically, a skyscraper could go infinitely high, as long as the tower did not cover more than 25 percent of the lot. This synopsis comes largely from Kenneth Revell, "Regulating the Landscape: Real Estate Values, City Planning, and the 1916 Zoning Ordinance," in *The Landscape of Modernity: Essays on New York City, 1900-1940*, ed. David Ward and Olivier Zunz (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1992), pp. 19-45. The literature on the creation and effects of the 1916 Zoning Resolution is, needless to say, enormous. For a good overview, see S. J. Makielski Jr., *The Politics of Zoning: The New York Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966).

23. *The WPA Guide to New York City: The Federal Writers' Project Guide to 1930s New York* (1939; reprint, New York: New Press, 1995).

24. Phrase is from a draft chapter for the *WPA Guide*. See WPA Federal Writers' Project—NYC Unit, "Architecture of New York," series 32, roll 117, MN# 21116 Municipal Archives (box 2, folder 2, "Miscellaneous").

25. RERBG, 7 and 14 February 1920.

26. In "Empire City: Politics, Culture, and Urbanism in Gilded-Age New York" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1989), David Moisseiff Scobey discusses the "market in space" in the post-Civil War period: "Manhattan land was no longer merely a site of activity or a repository of wealth, but a fund of capital from which surplus-value could be—had to be—extracted" (p. 91).

27. "Present and Future of Union Square," RERBG, 8 October 1904, p. 718.

28. F. Scott Fitzgerald, "My Lost City," in *The Crack-Up*, ed. Edmund Wilson (New York: New Directions, 1945), p. 25.

29. Kenneth T. Jackson, "The Capital of Capitalism: The New York Metropolitan Region," in *Metropolis, 1890-1940*, ed. Anthony Sutcliffe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

30. Emanuel Tobier, "Manhattan's Business District in the Industrial Age," in *Power, Culture, and Place*, ed. John Hull Mollenkopf (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1988), p. 85.

31. The peak immigration year was 1907, when just over one million immigrants were processed at Ellis Island (but that number was nearly matched in several other years as well).

32. Edward Ewing Pratt, "Industrial Causes of Congestion of Population in New York City," *Columbia University Studies in History, Economics and Public Law* 43 (1910): p. 45.

33. Ironically, however, Manhattan's greatest growth in manufacturing capability occurred in the final decades of the nineteenth century. The first three decades of the twentieth century saw Manhattan gradually lose its manufacturing empire, as the new borough of Brooklyn eclipsed it. In the first few decades of the twentieth century, manufacturing did continue to grow, but at a much slower rate than previously, particularly in comparison to Brooklyn.

34. Leybl Kahn, "The Loft Building in the Central Business District of Manhattan" (Ph.D. diss., Pratt Institute, June 1963).

35. The stores' dependence on their factories may explain why the Fifth Avenue Association never pushed for an outright ban on factories or a retroactive removal of the industries. The FAA after 1915 was in part led by executives from B. Altman and Bes and Co. See Gregory Gilmartin, *Shaping the City: New York and the Municipal Art Society* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1995), p. 192.

36. Gail Fenske and Deryck Holdsworth, "Corporate Identity and the New York Office Building, 1895-1915," in *The Landscape of Modernity: Essays on New York City, 1900-1940*, ed. David Ward and Olivier Zunz (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1992), pp. 129-59.

37. RERBG, 21 February 1920, p. 247.

38. Tobier, "Manhattan's Business District," p. 91.

39. Tobier, despite providing a fine summary of New York's development, falls into this logical trap.

For example: "As befits a commercial city built for profit and not for glory—be it of state or religion—its real estate market has exhibited little patience for nonpecuniary considerations. Yesterday's valued locational advantages of a given structure and use can never rest on their laurels in Manhattan, but must prove themselves at each new turn of the economic wheel. Failure invites the wrecker's ball and redevelopment, or worse, foreclosure for tax arrears" ("Manhattan's Business District," p. 79).

40. Scobey, "Empire City."
41. *RERBG*, 24 March 1900, p. 497.
42. *RERBG*, 8 January 1910, p. 56.
43. See Elizabeth Hawes, *New York, New York: How the Apartment House Transformed the Life of the City, 1863-1930* (New York: Knopf, 1993).
44. John Flavel Mines, *The Island of Manhattan, a Bit of Earth* (New York: Real Estate Loan and Trust Company of New York, 1890), p. 9.
45. *RERBG*, 4 June 1910, p. 1191. See also letters on the subject on 28 May 1910, pp. 1137 and 1140.
46. Pratt, "Industrial Causes of Congestion," p. 24.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
48. Blackmar, "Uptown Real Estate and the Creation of Times Square," p. 51.
49. Mines, *The Island of Manhattan*, p. 19.
50. Kinahan Cornwallis, "The Bixby Fortune: A Romance of Land Values in New York City," *New York Sun*, 2 October 1906.
51. Mines, *The Island of Manhattan*, p. 10.
52. See Scobey, "Empire City," pp. vi-viii, for a discussion of the mythology surrounding this first real estate transaction.
53. Mines, *The Island of Manhattan*, pp. 6-7.
54. Pratt, "Industrial Causes of Congestion," p. 106.
55. Reynolds, *History of a Great Thoroughfare*.
56. Pedrick, "Fifth Avenue To-Day," p. 101.
57. Collins, *Both Sides of Fifth Avenue*, p. 50.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
59. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
60. Moses King, *King's Handbook of New York City* (Boston: 1893; reprint ed., New York: Benjamin Blom, 1972), p. 153.
61. King, *Handbook of New York City*, pp. 150-52.
62. Hendrick, "The New Fifth Avenue," pp. 241-42.
63. James, *New York Revisited*, p. 40.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 232.
66. David, "The New Fifth Avenue," *Architectural Record*, p. 4. It was the early-nineteenth-century redbrick townhouses that drew the sentimental praise of critics. These homes, like those remaining on the north side of Washington Square, had an "elegance of simplicity and fine proportions," wrote Helen W. Henderson in *A Loiterer in New York* (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1917), p. 201.
67. David, "The New Fifth Avenue," *Architectural Record*, p. 2.
68. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
69. Reynolds, *History of a Great Thoroughfare*.
70. Hendrick, "The New Fifth Avenue," p. 244.
71. Henderson, *Loiterer in New York*, pp. 236-37. For another example of this genre of lament, see F. S. Laurence, "On the Passing of Delmonico's, an Architectural Landmark," *Architecture* 52 (November 1925): 419-21. Laurence noted that rarely in New York were buildings torn down because of structural weakness due to age: "[W]e do not revere [our buildings] sufficiently to allow them to remain standing

much more than a few years, twenty or thirty years at most. Madison Square Presbyterian Church, Madison Square Garden, and now Delmonico's! Will it be the Century Club next, or what other example of our good earlier architecture which yet survives, hinting of a traditional culture and a civic background of more than yesterday's origin?" (p. 419).

72. As I discuss in chapter 1, the reformers who have been included in the world of "Progressivism" varied radically in their philosophies and strategies. In the case of Fifth Avenue, reformers followed few rules, utilizing a whole range of strategies. For a discussion of how the term "Progressive" might still have relevance, see Daniel T. Rodgers, "In Search of Progressivism," *Reviews in American History* (December 1982): 112-32.

73. Hendrick, "The New Fifth Avenue," pp. 233, 241. Hendrick, who began his journalistic career as a writer for *McClure's* during the heyday of such muckrakers as Lincoln Steffens, Ida Tarbell, and Ray Stannard Baker, later became a biographer, or perhaps more accurately, a hagiographer. Ironically, in 1932 he completed a long biography of Carnegie, funded by Carnegie's widow (*Dictionary of American Biography*, supplement IV [1946-50], s.v. "Hendrick, Burton Jesse," pp. 367-68).

74. Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (New York: D. Appleton Co., 1921), pp. 24-25. This passage was the basis for one of the more startling images in the 1993 film version of *The Age of Innocence*: a view of Mrs. Manson Mingott's mansion in the middle of unsettled land around Central Park.

75. "The New Mayfair of New York City's Society," *NYT*, 6 September 1908, sec. 5, p. 4.

76. The most comprehensive collection of "holdout stories" can be found in Andrew Alpern and Seymour Durst, *New York's Architectural Holdouts* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 1984).

77. See G. W. Bromley, *Atlas of the City of New York, Borough of Manhattan*, plate 17, for a real estate map of the Herald Square district. It shows how Macy's failed to get the tiny corner piece in assembling eight convoluted parcels for its building site. Macy's struggle highlights one of the most difficult issues in New York real estate history: assembling lots necessary to build large buildings.

78. Reynolds, *History of a Great Thoroughfare*.

79. The seminary did finally sell the property in the 1930s. Today, imbedded in the base of a relatively new skyscraper, stands a brass relief sculpture of the Wendell home.

80. Discussed in Wist, *On Fifth Avenue, Then and Now*.

81. Andrew Alpern and Seymour B. Durst, *Holdouts!* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), p. 12.

82. *Ibid.*

83. *NYT*, 29 May 1920, p. 1.

84. Although the Vanderbilts led the battle to prevent development along the Avenue, they were hardly alone. As late as the 1920s, the Rockfellers were buying up lots adjacent to their mansions at Fifty-fourth Street in order to preserve the neighborhood. See *NYT*, 30 December 1925, p. 4.

85. For a discussion of the use of covenants in antebellum New York City, see Elizabeth Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent, 1785-1850* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 100-101.

86. For a report of the influence of restrictive covenants (and the ending of their twenty-five-year validity) on the development of the Upper West Side, see "Upper West Side Building Tendencies—A Reconstruction Movement Imminent," *RERBG*, 1 January 1910.

87. See Patricia Burgess Stach, "Deed Restrictions and Subdivision Development in Columbus, Ohio, 1900-1970," *Journal of Urban History* 15 (November 1988): 42-68 (on the appeal of covenants, see p. 66). In the increasingly dense area of midtown Manhattan, owners used covenants to protect access to light and air before the 1916 Zoning Resolution regulated building heights. For example, the Fifth Avenue Hotel held covenants on the abutting property to the rear in order to protect the hotel's access to light and air. See *RERBG*, 21 April 1900, p. 677.

88. Ironically, very little has been written about the use and effect of restrictive covenants, especially nonracially based covenants. See Stach, "Deed Restrictions," for a listing of existing works.

89. Aymar Embury II, "From Twenty-third Street Up—Part Two," *Brickbuilder* 25 (November 1916): 281.

90. "Fifth Avenue—From Forty-Second to Sixtieth," *NYT*, 13 September 1908, part 5, p. 5.
91. Discussed in Stern, Gilmartin, and Massengale, *New York 1900*, p. 312.
92. *NYT*, 13 September 1908, sec. 5, p. 5.
93. *NYT*, 31 January 1909.
94. Collins, *Both Sides of Fifth Avenue*, pp. 61-63.
95. John Foreman and Robbe Pierce Stimson, *The Vanderbilts and the Gilded Age* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 43.
96. *RERBG*, 13 March 1920, p. 340. Just as the rise of Millionaire's Mile was not a steady, linear process, neither was its demise. Even the removal of private homes along Fifth Avenue was not a steady process. For example, after World War I began and the whole real estate market slowed, pressure on Fifth Avenue residents to convert their mansions into high-rises or office buildings declined. Latercomers to the "age of gold" quickly marched in to gain a foothold on the Avenue. See Embury, "From Twenty-third Street Up—Part Two," for private homes built in the first two decades after 1900.
97. *RERBG*, 8 January 1910, p. 51.
98. Hawes, *New York, New York*, p. 222. The lawsuits are discussed in "Upper Fifth Avenue's Future," *RERBG*, 12 April 1924 and in the months thereafter. See also Stern, Gilmartin, and Massengale, *New York 1900*, p. 387.
99. James, *New York Revisited*, p. 242. Several commentators saw this development as a "democratization" of the Avenue. See, for example, Mines, *The Island of Manhattan*; and *RERBG*, 12 April 1924.
100. Hawes, *New York, New York*, p. 195.
101. *Ibid.*, pp. 199, 222.
102. Pedrick, "Fifth Avenue To-Day," p. 103.
103. See Fifth Avenue Association (hereafter cited as FAA), *Report for the Year* (1916), cover. The FAA is discussed extensively in Toll, *Zoned America*.
104. FAA, *Fifty Years on Fifth, 1907-1957* (New York: International Press, 1957), p. 36.
105. FAA, *Report for the Year* (1912), p. 3.
106. FAA, *Fifty Years on Fifth*, p. 36.
107. Fifth Avenue Commission, *Preliminary Report of Fifth Avenue Commission* (New York: R.L. Stillson Co., 1912), p. 2.
108. See *NYT*, 11 December 1994, city section, p. 6, for a comparison of the value of the land on Fifth Avenue with elite retail corridors worldwide.
109. For a discussion of the number and powers of BIDs in New York City today, see *NYT*, 20 November 1994. An almost apocalyptic portrait of America's future, especially the "fortress" mentality of elites, can be found in Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).
110. Minutes of the FAA, 30 April 1907.
111. At times critics attacked the existence of these private police forces, over which the public had no control. These same accusations are made about business improvement districts (BIDs) today. In 1995, the Grand Central Partnership was found guilty of beating and forcibly removing homeless people from the area of Grand Central Station (see *NYT*, 7 July 1995, p. B1).
112. Scobey shows the centrality of the "arterial sclerosis" problem to public policy debates of the Gilded Age city ("Empire City," chap. 3).
113. The FAA leadership strongly advocated widening the Avenue, although on this issue they found themselves opposed to a large portion of their members. The process of widening brought great destruction to the elite homes, stores, and restaurants of the Avenue. Repeatedly, newspapers and magazines offered updates on the widening work, with complete catalogues of what was lost in the process.
114. See FAA, *Report for the Year*, (1922) for a discussion of the gift of the towers to the city.
115. Minutes of the FAA, 13 April 1911.
116. Minutes of the FAA, 3 Dec. 1912, in *FAA Minutes, 1 Dec. 1909-9 Feb. 1915* (collection held by the Fifth Avenue Association).

117. For a book-length study of the Municipal Art Society's role in city planning and beautification, see Gregory Gilmartin, *Shaping the City*.
118. Minutes of the FAA, 24 Jan. 1911.
119. *Ibid.*
120. Fifth Avenue Commission, *Preliminary Report*, p. 2.
121. See Gilmartin, *Shaping the City*, p. 194.
122. In an article on unsightly advertising methods displayed on the Avenue, the FAA showed a photograph of a store with a sign saying "liquidation sale": "Conditions like these destroy the character of a community, injure business and lower property values. They are rare indeed in the Fifth Avenue Section, because destructive influences are promptly detected and corrected by the watchful eye of our Association." *The Avenue*, October 1925, p. 5.
123. Minutes of the FAA, 28 March 1910.
124. Minutes of the FAA, 28 March 1910; 5 April 1910; and 3 May 1910.
125. FAA, *Report for the Year* (1922), pp. 36-39. The Sign Ordinance passed in January of 1922 and also included Madison Avenue between Thirty-fourth and Seventy-second, Thirty-fourth Street between Lexington and Seventh Avenue, and Fifty-seventh Street between Lexington and Broadway. The lawsuit against these restrictions was *Loon Hing v Crowley*, 113 US 703, 708, 709 (1922).
126. Minutes of the FAA, 30 March 1908.
127. Even as the FAA achieved its most fundamental victory, it continued to use more informal, semipublic means to hasten the elimination of the noxious manufacturing enterprises that had settled on the Avenue. Through the Save Your City Committee, the FAA was able to dispatch with manufacturing and eliminate visual "nuisances." See, for example, *RERBG*, 3 January 1920, p. 8.
128. It was McAneny who pushed for the formation, in 1914, of a permanent city-planning committee (instead the standing Committee on the City Plan was created, only to be abolished in 1918 under new Democratic Mayor John Hylan) and initiated a series of important public works projects (including new bridges, street widenings, and subway lines). He was also executive manager of the *New York Times* and director of the Regional Plan Association after 1930.
129. In its 1912 pamphlet advocating height limitations, the FAA's counsel, Bruce Falconer, listed thirteen cities in seven European countries and twenty-five large U.S. cities that enforced some form of height limitations. FAA, *Statement of the Fifth Avenue Association on the Limitation of Building Heights, to the New York City Commission and the Testimony of the Association's Representatives at a Conference, June 19, 1913* (New York, 1913), p. 22.
130. FAA, *Statement*, pp. 2-3.
131. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
132. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
133. See Revell, "Regulating the Landscape," p. 23.
134. The FAA used the tragedy of the Triangle fire to issue the following resolution on 4 April 1911: "Whereas the members of a democratic community are . . . responsible for the conditions existing in the Washington Place building which made it possible for the recent disaster to occur were deplorable and whereas there are many similar buildings in New York City and particularly in the Fifth Avenue district in which it is possible for similar conditions to exist. Resolved: That we offer our co-operation in the various movements now on foot in the community leading towards better legislation for fire prevention and especially endorsing the Bureau of Fire Prevention recommended by the Fire Commissioner." Minutes of the FAA, 4 April 1911.
135. FAA, *Statement*, p. 18.
136. Minutes of the FAA, 15 May 1912.
137. Gilmartin, *Shaping the City*, p. 191.
138. Minutes of the FAA, 23 February 1911.
139. See, for example, Minutes of the FAA, 24 March 1915.

140. Gilmartin, *Shaping the City*, pp. 194-95: "The city's finances were inextricably tangled up with those high assessments. Eight percent of the city's budget flowed from taxes on property or buildings: the whole architecture of the municipal bond market rested on this foundation."

141. See Gilmartin, *Shaping the City*, p. 198; as well as *Housing Betterment* 5, no. 2 (May 1916); and *RERBC*, 3 January 1920. Gilmartin and others have wondered why the FAA never tried to achieve an outright ban on garment factories. This may have been because the FAA was increasingly dominated by members of the garment industry and Jewish businessmen, who may have been more sympathetic to the garment workers' plight, many of whom were Jewish. See Minutes of the FAA, 22 June 1915, for a discussion of the transformation of the FAA leadership.

142. Bruce Falconer, the FAA's counsel, offered an example of the building of a fifty-story skyscraper: "The erection of such a building on one lot would then take the place of four other possible improvements on four other lots. Instead of tearing down five old and antiquated structures, and instead of having five modern buildings of up-to-date requirements and handsome architecture, only one is demolished and one new one erected. Instead of spreading the area of improvements and lessening the congestion of street and living conditions, the improvements tend naturally to confine themselves to a more narrow and prescribed area, and the occupants of buildings to be concentrated in a particular district." FAA, *Statement*, p. 15.

143. Henderson, *Loiterer in New York*, p. 237.

144. Reynolds, *History of a Great Thoroughfare*.

#### CHAPTER THREE

1. Joseph Mitchell, "The Bottom of the Harbor" (1951), in Mitchell, *Up In the Old Hotel* (New York: Vintage, 1993), p. 479.

2. Joel Schwartz, *The New York Approach: Robert Moses, Urban Liberals, and Redevelopment of the Inner City* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993), p. xv.

3. See, for example, Roy Lubove, *The Progressives and the Slums: Tenement House Reform in New York City, 1890-1917* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962); Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981); and Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City: Dwelling Type and Social Change in the American Metropolis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). Joel Schwartz offers perhaps the most insightful discussion of the roots of urban renewal, at least for New York.

4. Wright, *Building the Dream*, p. 117.

5. Riis himself noted the difference between the legal definition and the "narrower" but more accepted definition in *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (1890; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1971), pp. 14-15.

6. Plunz, *History of Housing in New York City*, p. 2. Plunz notes several other early-nineteenth-century examples of city-initiated building demolitions.

7. Elizabeth Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent: 1785-1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 172-76.

8. Report of the 1853 Tenement House Committee, quoted in *The Tenement House Problem*, ed. Robert W. De Forest and Lawrence Veiller (New York: Macmillan, 1903), p. 77; and Lawrence Veiller, "Tenement House Reform in New York City, 1834-1900," in *Tenement House Problem*, pp. 83-84.

9. Veiller, "Tenement House Reform," pp. 80, 109.

10. Plunz, *History of Housing in New York City*, p. 52.

11. See Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), chap. 4, on the relationship of photography and social reform. Recent research into the Riis photographs (and a 1995 exhibit of newly printed images from glass plate negatives at the Museum of the City of New York, the repository of the largest collection of Riis negatives) reveals that Riis was aided by a number of photographers—many of the most famous images attributed to Riis are in fact theirs—and that he was much

less of a self-conscious photographer than previously thought. See Bonnie Yochelson, "What Are the Photographs of Jacob Riis?" *Culturefront* 3 (September 1994): pp. 28-38.

12. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, p. 49.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

14. Jacob A. Riis, "The Clearing of Mulberry Bend: The Story of the Rise and Fall of a Typical New York Slum," *American Review of Reviews* 12 (August 1895): p. 174; "crazy old buildings" is a quote of the Society for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor, in Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, p. 11. The violence of Mulberry Bend frequently made its way into the literary imagination. See, for example, Edward Townsend's story, "How the Other Half Dies," in Townsend, *Chimmie Fadden Explains, Major Max Expounds* (New York: United States Book Company, 1895), pp. 203-13.

15. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, p. 5.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

17. Charles A. Madison, introduction to Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, p. vi.

18. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, p. 214.

19. Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (1885; reprint, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963); Joaquin Miller, *The Destruction of Gotham* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1886); and Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward* (1888; reprint, New York: New American Library, 1960). For a lengthy discussion of the fears of urban America see Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), especially pp. 123-33.

20. Ignatius Donnelly, *Caesar's Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century* (London: Ward, Lock and Co., 1890; reprint ed., Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960); James R. McCabe Jr., *Light and Shadows of New York Life* (1872; reprint, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970). A number of other guidebooks established this dichotomy between rich and poor.

21. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, p. 229. The belief that social unrest had its roots in bad housing conditions was widespread. For a later example of this view, see Andrew J. Thomas, "Is It Advisable to Remodel Slum Tenements?" *Architectural Record* (November 1920): pp. 417-24.

22. The phrase is from James Bryce, "The Menace of Great Cities," *National Housing Association Publications*, no. 20, June 1913. Bryce was the British Ambassador to the United States.

23. E. R. L. Gould, "The Only Cure for Slums," *The Forum* 19 (1895): pp. 499, 500. These attitudes conform with the emerging picture of adolescent psychology propounded by the likes of G. Stanley Hall. See Joseph F. Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

24. New York State Tenement House Committee, *Report of the Tenement House Committee* (Albany: 1895), p. 41. The fear of adolescent attacks on buildings prevailed throughout this period. See Tenement House Committee of the Charity Organization Society, *Why Abandoned Buildings Should Be Demolished* (New York, 1936); for a later, fictional exploration of youth "house attacks," see Graham Greene's short story, "The Destroyers" in Greene, *Collected Stories* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), pp. 327-46.

25. Veiller, "Tenement House Reform," pp. 80, 109.

26. Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order*, chap. 15. Boyer also uses the phrase "negative environmentalists" (p. 190) to describe the "coercive and moralistic approach" of reformers combatting urban ills. I use the phrase here to describe the view that the destruction of certain "bad" places was as important as building better ones.

27. Lubove, *The Progressives and the Slums*, p. 78.

28. The Olmsted legacy was quite direct: Calvert Vaux, Olmsted's partner on Central Park, designed Mulberry Bend Park.

29. Riis, "The Clearing of Mulberry Bend," p. 178.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*

33. Ibid.
34. Note that the subtitle of "The Clearing of Mulberry Bend" article is "The Story of the Rise and Fall of a Typical New York Slum."
35. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, p. 5.
36. Ibid., p. 49.
37. Ibid.
38. Charles Dickens, *American Notes*, 2 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1842), quoted in Plunz, *History of Housing in New York City*, p. 51. The Five Points, along with Niagara Falls and the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, was one of the primary sites Dickens wanted to visit during his American tour in 1842. About the Five Points, Dickens observed: "What place is this, to which the squalid street conducts us? A kind of square of leprous houses, some of which are attainable only by crazy wooden stairs without. What lies beyond this tottering flight of steps, that creak beneath our tread!" The phrase "battle with the slum" is from Jacob A. Riis, *The Battle with the Slum* (New York: Macmillan, 1902).
39. New York State Tenement House Commission, *Report of the Tenement House Commission* (1884), p. 10.
40. "Condition of Mulberry Bend," *New York Times*, 7 December 1894, p. 2. Seth Low, then the president of Columbia University, was highly critical of the city owning the Mulberry Bend slum. Especially preposterous, at least to reformers, was the claim by some landlords that they be paid not only for the assessed market sale value of the property, but also the rental value. Why, argued reformers, should slumlords be rewarded for packing in over one hundred people in inhuman conditions?
41. "Bought a House for \$1.50—Old Buildings in Mulberry Bend Sold at Auction," *New York Times*, 7 June 1895, p. 7.
42. For a good overview of the Mulberry Bend story, see James B. Lane, *Jacob A. Riis and the American City* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1974), pp. 113-15.
43. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, p. 223.
44. De Forest and Veiller, *Tenement House Problem*, p. 102.
45. For a discussion of the efforts—and failures—of each of the tenement house commissions, see De Forest and Veiller, *The Tenement House Problem*, which reproduces the entire 1901 Tenement House Commission report.
46. Felix Adler, "Tenement House Reform: What the Government Should Do (The Last of Felix Adler's Lectures)," *New York Daily Tribune*, 10 March 1884, p. 8.
47. For a discussion of the role of the COS, see Plunz, *History of Housing in New York City*, pp. 39-42; and the COS Committee on Housing, *Forty Years of Housing: The Story of the Tenement House Committee of the Charity Organization Society of the City of New York* (New York, 1938).
48. Gould, "The Only Cure for Slums," pp. 495, 500. Robert Moses, Gould's descendant in spirit, used a similar phrase a half century later when he declared that "When you operate in an over-built metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat ax." Moses, *Public Works: A Dangerous Trade* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), quoted in Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1982), pp. 293-94. The architect Le Corbusier used a similar expression in discussing the rebuilding of Paris in the nineteenth century: "I thank Louis XIV, Napoleon, and Haussmann for having cut through the city with some clear and intelligent axes." Le Corbusier, *When the Cathedrals Were White: A Journey to the Country of Timid People* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947), p. 47.
49. Gould, "The Only Cure for Slums," p. 498.
50. Ibid.; Tenement House Committee, *Report* (1895), p. 359.
51. De Forest and Veiller, *The Tenement House Problem*, p. 206.
52. *Health Department v Dassori*, 21 App. Div 348, 47 New York, discussed in James Ford, *Slums and Housing*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), 513.
53. *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide*, 31 March 1900, p. 539.
54. *New York Tribune*, 23 December 1895, quoted in Lane, *Jacob A. Riis*, p. 114.

55. The division between speculators and landlords—admittedly not a simple, permanent division—was exacerbated at the end of the century by the intensity of population growth and the expansion of property ownership to a wider range of people, including more immigrants. The rental business became an important means of upward mobility; these new, immigrant property owners who had little social or cultural connection to speculators or reformers were resistant to demolition efforts that took away what they considered to be legitimate profit-making ventures. Speculators, of course, saw the benefits of public intervention. See Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent*, p. 173. For a powerful thesis on the "pluralization" of power in turn-of-the-century New York, see David C. Hammack, *Power and Society: Greater New York at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). For a discussion of the rise of Italian landownership in the Lower East Side, see Donna Gabbaccia, "Little Italy's Decline: Immigrant Renters and Investors in a Changing City," in *The Landscape of Modernity*, ed. David Ward and Oliver Zunz (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1992).
56. New York City Tenement House Department, *Report* (1902-3), p. 513.
57. Ibid., p. 5.
58. Ibid., p. 282.
59. Tenement House Department, *Report* (1914), p. 10.
60. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, p. 214.
61. For a discussion of the attack on the Tenement House Law in its first fifteen years, see "Lawrence Veiller," Columbia Oral History Project, Feb. and March 1949, transcript, pp. 44f.
62. Ibid., p. 39.
63. Lawrence Veiller, "A Housing Programme," *National Housing Association Publications*, no. 16, June 1912.
64. For a discussion of how government might aid housing development during the post-World War I housing shortage, see Veiller, "The Housing Situation and the Way Out," *National Housing Association Publications*, no. 55 (December 1920).
65. Lawrence Veiller, "Government Housing in Practice," *Housing* 23, no. 2 (October 1935): p. 168.
66. Lawrence Veiller, "The Housing Problem in the United States," *National Housing Association Publications*, no. 61 (March 1930).
67. *Housing* 23 (June 1935): p. 85.
68. "Veiller," Columbia Oral History Project, p. 55.
69. Ford, *Slums and Housing*, p. 511.
70. Tenement House Department *Reports*. For example, in 1919, only 183 old-law buildings, comprising 1,442 apartments, were demolished. The numbers grew during the 1920s housing boom: in 1924, 356 buildings housing 2,889 were torn down; in 1927, 470 structures housing 4,620 people were demolished. The statistics from 1930, when 7,580 old-law apartments were torn down (due to the slum clearance on Chrystie and Forsyth Streets and in the Lung Block), are the highest for a single year.
- | YEAR | NO. OF BUILDINGS | NO. OF APARTMENTS |
|------|------------------|-------------------|
| 1918 | 55               | 493               |
| 1919 | 183              | 1,442             |
| 1925 | 441              | 3,733             |
| 1929 | 467              | 5,191             |
| 1930 | 665              | 7,580             |
| 1931 | 311              | 3,355             |
| 1934 | 334              | 3,934             |
71. Ford, *Slums and Housing*, p. 511.
72. Ibid.
73. Joel Schwartz calls this view "economic puritanism" (*The New York Approach*, p. 24). In his 1935 work, James Ford discusses the limitations—namely the requirement of market value compensation—of the New York Charter and Building Code, Sections 1299 and 1300.

74. Lawrence Veiller, "How England Is Meeting Its Housing Shortage," *National Housing Association Publications*, no. 56 (September 1920): p. 91.
75. Ford, *Slums and Housing*, p. 513. On the comprehensiveness of the British approach, see Lawrence Veiller, "Government Housing in Practice," *Housing* 23, no. 2 (Oct. 1935); and Ernst Kahn, "Government Housing in the United States, as Seen by a Foreign Observer," *Housing* 23, no. 2 (Oct. 1935).
76. Plunz, *History of Housing in New York City*, pp. 184ff. The Amalgamated Houses by Springsteen and Goldhammer, on Grand Street near the Williamsburg Bridge, were perhaps the most direct copies of European models of the 1920s. They resemble closely the dramatic design of the Karl Marx Hof in Vienna, designed by Karl Ehn in the late 1920s. See Robert A. M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, and John Massengale, *New York 1900: Metropolitan Architecture and Urbanism, 1890-1915* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983), p. 421.
77. Charity Organization Society, *Forty Years of Housing*, pp. 14-15.
78. See Schwartz, *The New York Approach*, p. 23; Roy Lubove, *Community Planning in the 1920s*; and Plunz, *History of Housing in New York City*, pp. 101-2.
79. David Kennedy offers the best overview of the impact of World War I on American life in *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).
80. New York State Board of Housing, *Report Relative to the Housing Emergency in New York and Buffalo*, table V, cited in Plunz, *History of Housing in New York City*, p. 126.
81. See Edith Elmer Woods, *The Housing of the Unskilled Wage Earner* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), cited in Schwartz, *The New York Approach*, p. 23.
82. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, p. 224.
83. Tenement House Department, *Report* (1914), p. 9.
84. See Roy Lubove, "I. N. Phelps Stokes: Tenement Architect, Economist, Planner," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 23 (May 1964): p. 85; and Lawson Purdy, "Why We Need Excess Condemnation: A Boon to the Property Owner—A Blessing to the Public," *National Municipal Review* (July 1923): pp. 363-68.
85. One of the most startling ideas was offered by Mayor William J. Gaynor in 1910: he suggested cutting a new avenue between Fifth and Sixth in order to ease traffic congestion. See Rebecca Read Shanor, *The City That Never Was* (New York: Penguin, 1988), pp. 11-16.
86. See Stern, Gilmartin, and Massengale, *New York 1900*, p. 443.
87. Simkhovitch quoted in Schwartz, *The New York Approach*, p. 42. Simkhovitch is a fascinating figure: she founded and led Greenwich House (a settlement house) for half a century, in the process becoming one of the leading advocates for city planning, public housing, and the "decongestion" of the city. See the Mary K. Simkhovitch Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.
88. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, p. 27.
89. De Forest quoted by Fred F. French (the developer of Knickerbocker Village), in "Housing in Lower Manhattan" (address to the Department of Economics and Social Institutions, Princeton University, 24 April 1934), typescript, p. 3.
90. French, "Housing in Lower Manhattan," p. 8. For the demolition required for Knickerbocker Village, French's company was paid \$340,000, mostly funded by the federal government.
91. Schwartz, *The New York Approach*, p. 46.
92. For an excellent discussion of the politics and philosophy of public housing in New York City in the 1920s and 1930s, see Gail Radford, *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
93. *The WPA Guide to New York City: The Federal Writers' Project Guide to 1930s New York* (1939; reprint, New York: New Press, 1995), p. 18.
94. The Lower East Side still has a number of so-called pre-law tenements—that is, tenements built previous to the first major tenement law, the 1879 "dumbbell" regulations. Even today old-law tenements opposite Columbus Park at the bend in Mulberry Street survive, and throughout the Lower East

Side, hundred-year-old old-law tenements house new generations of Asian and Latino immigrants. Despite New Deal slum clearance, despite Robert Moses's urban renewal projects, the "foul core of New York" persists. The reason is simple: for all the complaints landlords lodged against the city's tenement regulations, the buildings were and continue to be profitable. The work of Jacob Riis and other tenement reformers seemed to mimic the creatively destructive cycle of urban development in the rest of the city. But, ironically, the real estate market had found underdevelopment in the Lower East Side a profitable venture, and successfully slowed the rapid transformation of the landscape.

95. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1961), chap. 16.
96. Ford, *Slums and Housing*, p. 516.
97. "Modernism of the streets" is discussed in Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, pp. 314-32.
98. Edward W. Townsend, *A Daughter of the Tenements* (New York: Lovell, Coyell, 1895), pp. 60-61.
99. James Huneker, *The New Cosmopolis: A Book of Images*, quoted in *The Old East Side: An Anthology*, ed. Milton Hindus (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969), p. 293.
100. Riis, "The Clearing of Mulberry Bend," p. 176.
101. John Sloan, for example, noted his explorations of the Bowery, Little Italy, and Chinatown at night, which he found "right interesting," although Chinatown was "a bit too picturesque for my purposes" (10 June 1906 journal entry, quoted in *John Sloan's New York Scene*, ed. Bruce St. John (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 40).
102. James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).
103. Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money* (1930; reprint, New York: Carroll and Graf, 1996), p. 73. Gold, however, also sees something redeeming in destruction. The book ends with its call to revolution—"the true Messiah"—rooted in demolishing the Lower East Side, where the evils that created the poverty of his people were to be seen at their most extreme. "You will destroy the East Side when you come, and build there a garden for the human spirit" (pp. 13, 309).
104. Alfred Kazin, *A Walker in the City* (1946; reprint, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), pp. 12-13.
105. Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). For a discussion of the rise of the Lower East Side as a place of memory for Jews, see Beth S. Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression: Uncertain Promise* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).
106. In this case, the "heritage" of the Lower East Side was troubling and embarrassing. The Chamber found that at least 10 percent of the Lower East Side's realty was owned by these monied estates. See Joseph Platzker, "Who Owns the Lower East Side?" *East Side Chamber News* 2, no. 5 (July 1929).
107. *Ibid.*
108. Lillian D. Wald, *The House on Henry Street* (1915; reprint, New York: Dover, 1971), p. 81.
109. Typescript of speech by Robert Moses on the occasion of the celebration of the seventieth anniversary of the University Settlement in America at the Commodore Hotel, 14 November 1956, Municipal Reference Library, vertical files, "NYC Slums."

## CHAPTER FOUR

1. American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society (hereafter cited as ASHPS), *Annual Report*, 1910, p. 3.
2. William R. Taylor, *In Pursuit of Gotham: Culture and Commerce in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. xvii. The idea that commerce has ruled New York like some force of nature is common. Gregory Gilmartin, an architectural historian, writes that battling against "progress"—that is, commercial growth and its physical shape—"was like setting oneself against a law of nature or, worst yet, like questioning the American dream." Gregory F. Gilmartin, *Shaping the City: New York and the Municipal Art Society* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1995), p. 342.