
THE LANDSCAPE OF MODERNITY

Essays on New York City,
1900–1940

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Russell Sage Foundation

New York

Between Rationalism and Pluralism: Creating the Modern City

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With the amalgamation of the five boroughs in 1898 into a greater city, New York became the most populous city in the world after London. The new metropolitan government and its public agencies faced the challenge of rationalizing a vastly expanded city, with a burgeoning business center in Manhattan and expansive suburbanization. In addition, New York City absorbed a more numerous and diverse flow of immigrants than any other city in the nation. The outcome was a rational and pluralistic metropolis of unprecedented scale.

By the first decade of the twentieth century, New York was already a precursor of those world cities that now anchor global capitalism. In 1901, John Hay, in his eulogy for President McKinley, proclaimed that "the financial center of the world, which required thousands of years to journey from the Euphrates to the Thames and the Seine, seems passing to the Hudson between daybreak and dark."¹ New York was becoming a leading international financial center while remaining both the largest manufacturing center and entrepôt in the United States.² These economic functions resulted in a complex assemblage of building types set within a diversified metropolis: a vast array of skyscrapers, department stores, and hotels juxtaposed with residential quarters both lavish and squalid, warehouses and port facilities, factories and sweatshops. Although the region's deindustrialization has altered much of that landscape in recent decades, what was once typical of New York still defines global cities throughout the world. In this volume, then, we retrace the creation of the modern urban landscape in its birthplace, New York City.

In New York, the modern skyline attained its earliest and most extraordinary expression. The New York skyline, and with it the character of the city, was transformed by the construction of dozens of skyscrapers in lower Manhattan. Indeed, for much of the world, its dense lines of skyscrapers are the most graphic statement of modernity. When Le Corbusier, a spokesman for architectural modernism, visited New York in 1930, he celebrated the novelty of that landscape. Although the extreme density of tall buildings on Manhattan was distinct from his modern vision of well-spaced towers, Le Corbusier found his preferred landscape more fully realized in New York than anywhere else in the world. Le Corbusier saw "a vertical city, under the sign of the new times"; and he added in a tone celebratory of modern times: "America, which is in a process of permanent evolution, which possesses infinite reserve of materials, which is animated by an energy potential unique in the world, is surely the country first able to bring to fulfillment, and with an exceptional perfection, this contemporary task" of calling "into service all the techniques of modern times" to build the "radiant city."³

Our book neither celebrates that landscape nor assumes that the architectural components of the vertical city or great public works alone can be a complete record of modernity. Indeed, the term "modernity" conveys a myriad of loosely connected meanings—among them the Enlightenment philosopher's faith in secularized knowledge, the nineteenth century poet's search for the ephemeral, and the twentieth century architect's functional designs.⁴ Here, we refer to those aspects of modernity directly resulting from the interrelationship of the two great forces that shaped New York: rationalism and pluralism. Neither rationality nor pluralism was new. What was new was their intensity. Whereas nineteenth century America had been a *de facto* pluralist society with an ideology of assimilation, an aspiration for cultural pluralism intensified just as political, economic, social, and cultural processes were creating a more homogeneous nation. The vigorous search for rationality met with an equally vigorous defense of cultural segmentation.⁵

In this book, we capture the process of adjustment between these conflicting objectives. Within the rough boundaries of New York's political economy, the representatives of corporate capital, real estate, and regulation were building the rational city, the vertical city, and the transport systems essential to its continued vitality. The skyscrapers of the rational city were enmeshed in an extraordinary jumble of neighborhoods and cultural clusters, a microcosm of American diversity.

Corporate capitalism and cultural pluralism in a real sense vied for

influence across New York's space and skyline. Their advocates were often at odds with each other. In the tough conflicts for space that ensued among speculators, corporate builders, civic leaders, and immigrant entrepreneurs, we see the competing configurations of modernity. Henry Adams, who witnessed this clash, wrote in 1905 that "the city had the air and movement of hysteria."⁶ Although it may be hard to reconcile the seeming certainties of rationality with the seeming chaos of diversity, we argue that these overtly contradictory dimensions are integral parts of the modern experience. The landscape of modernity combined formal and informal economies, tall and small buildings, the service sector and industry, and the deeds of machine politicians and those of reformers.

Vertical and Horizontal Components of the Modern Landscape

A collaboration of social and architectural historians, historical geographers, political scientists, and historians of planning and public policy, this book approaches the relationships between past and present and between form and process from several disciplinary perspectives. Yet it is unified by the authors' common preoccupation with the physical landscape and the complementary perspectives of their individual disciplines. We interpret New York's landscape by linking its key physical and visual configurations to the political, economic, social, and cultural processes of the twentieth century.

In doing so, we take several snapshots of New York that together define the modern landscape. First before the eye is the vertical capitalist city that has captured the imagination of observers like Le Corbusier and that has become part of popular culture. Although some of the key prototypical experiments in the construction of the vertical city were initially worked out in Chicago, lower Manhattan was the site of the world's first major concentration of skyscrapers, the symbol of the modern city.⁷ In 1904, Henry James, seeing the spire of his beloved Trinity Church lost amidst tall buildings, deplored the disappearance of the five-story Victorian city.⁸ He had only an inkling of the radical transformation still to occur, a transformation driven by high land values, steel-frame construction, and powerful elevators. By 1910, New York had not only outdistanced all other places in the world in the upward extension of its buildings, it had already twice as many tall structures as Chicago would have a full decade later.⁹

Areas transformed by the vertical expansion of the city were the subject of intense debates. Some buildings provided office space for new or rapidly growing corporate enterprises in finance, insurance, commerce, and trade. Others were hotels and luxury apartment build-

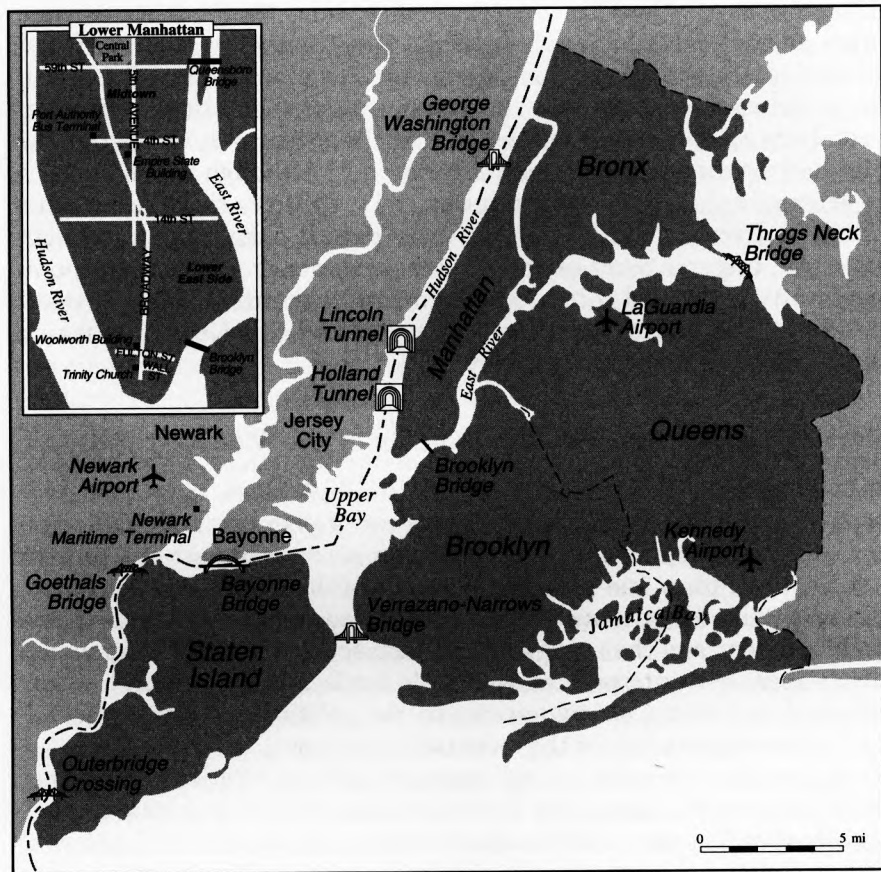


Figure 1.1 New York City Boroughs.

ings. Still others served the needs of New York's garment industry as sweatshops piled up on top of one another. This process generated a great deal of heated controversy among corporate builders, garment entrepreneurs, real estate speculators, Fifth Avenue merchants, and planners over the character of the downtown area.

In this volume, Gail Fenske, Deryck Holdsworth, and Carol Willis explore the strategies of corporate builders and real estate speculators. Both builders and speculators wanted to maximize their return on investment. In the process, they created a new aesthetic that combined modern design with new interior arrangements that catered to the requirements of their tenants. Indeed, the vertical architecture of the corporate city resulted from interior as well as exterior constraints.

The skyscrapers also reflected the new relationships between the corporations and the thousands of small firms that serviced them. To finance their headquarters, corporate giants provided space for these small firms, which required close proximity to each other and to their corporate clients. The Woolworth company occupied fewer than two stories in its fifty-five-story headquarters building. The Empire State Building's design tightly combined the search for vertical monumentality with that of maximum profitability. A temporary failure because of the Depression, the building turned out to be an extraordinary concentration of well-lit, first-class offices for a great many firms which, in World War II and beyond, would need an anchor in the nerve center of American capitalism.

As new corporate organizations and related smaller firms drew unprecedented concentrations of professionals and clerks downtown, other forces pulled the landscape in different directions. New middle-class neighborhoods expanded, new working-class areas sprang up, and older ones were displaced; phenomena studied in this volume by Nancy Green, Donna Gabaccia, and Deborah Dash Moore. The transformations of the core were also tied to the expansion of port facilities on both sides of the Hudson and the enhancement of railroad terminals, as the waterfront, traditionally connected to the central business district, was now severed from it in the increasing land use specialization. The push and pull of these varied forces created a mosaic of often incompatible and conflicting industrial and residential neighborhoods and an extraordinarily complex but incomplete system of communications.

The sheer dimension and physiographic complexity of the Hudson River and its associated bays limited access to the city center and constricted the development of a regional transportation system. The new mosaic of land uses, the sheer size of the built-up area, and the demand for greater mobility of goods and people required that these limitations be overcome and an elaborate system of connectors be built to meet interregional and internal needs. Great new bridges and tunnels—the longest in the world—were imagined, and some were built. Elevated railroads and subways characterized the expanding transportation network, and a vast web of highways emerged from the mud, sand, and slums of the city.

The extraordinary bridges and tunnels that connect Manhattan to Long Island and the mainland became, like the city's skyscrapers, part of the imagery of the modern city. Since the building of the Brooklyn Bridge, each new crossing from Manhattan island, whether above or below ground, marked an engineering advance. With the completion of the Holland Tunnel in 1927 and the George Washington Bridge in

1931, a crucial phase in the development of modern New York was completed. Commuters to and from new suburban homes west of the city could now bypass the slow Hudson ferry system; and trucking companies were able to compete with railroads in bringing freight from the rest of the continent to New York's factories, shops, and steamship piers.

Politics and Visions

In 1905, Henry Adams had insisted that "the new forces" transforming New York "must at any cost be brought under control."¹⁰ His estimation of the situation was widely shared. Indeed, the historical literature overflows with analyses of the ways in which both political bosses and progressive reformers attempted and failed to control the environment. Tammany Hall and the political and social reformers typically battled over the same ethnically segregated neighborhoods. The overriding need to cope with the new scale of metropolitan life, however, made the conflicts between the old politics of corruption and the new politics of reform less decisive. The big changes that emerged, such as the creation of Greater New York in the last years of the nineteenth century, were the result of hard-won, complex, ad hoc alliances among these contenders for political control.¹¹

The newly formed planning agencies eventually set the agenda for debate. With time, even New York's fabled skyline became a partially regulated skyline. A planning tradition—and a new profession—was created in New York City. A complex of these new institutions attempted to redefine the public interest. Their proponents, who wielded considerable political power, promoted advances in urban engineering by balancing the centralizing functions of the city's corporate economy with the diffuse pluralistic realities of a metropolis.

Planning agencies became political forces in their own right. Keith Revell and Marc Weiss analyze the ways planning for the metropolis became, on the one hand, a matter of public discourse and, on the other, a pretext for strengthening an invisible government of experts shielded from electoral politics. The new experts not only mediated among local interests, they also set legal precedents.

Regulating the city also became an integral part of the politics of the growing regulatory state. In looking closely at the 1916 zoning law, the first zoning effort in the country aimed primarily at rationalizing the landscape rather than excluding "undesirables" (like zoning laws elsewhere), Keith Revell and Marc Weiss tell the story of the first planning professionals: how they went about redesigning the cityscape with an ingenious scheme of setback architecture for skyscraper con-

struction, why they buried progressive taxation (with its socialist overtones), and why they cast the future of the metropolis in an apparently neutral language of public health.

New agencies also constructed most of the public arteries that connected sections of the metropolis. Clifton Hood tells of the ways the subway created and revitalized entire neighborhoods. Robert Fishman and Jameson Doig report on the debates over rail and automobile connections, and Doig describes the controversies generated by the construction of the George Washington Bridge. Creating these links led to new relationships among the city, the state, and private parties. Special-purpose authorities for transport improvements not only reinforced the growing role of experts in politics, they also mediated among traditional political institutions. These authorities and others created in the 1930s and after would then shape the metropolis for the remainder of the century. By opting for the automobile over rail links by the late 1920s, and promoting a national trend, the Port Authority left a deep imprint on the city. Meanwhile Robert Moses, that master builder, watched the Port Authority at work and learned how to implement his own extensive version of the same program.

It was also clear that these strategies to reduce congestion created new problems associated with decentralization. In fact, although the comprehensive twentieth century plans for the renewal of American cities that were supported by groups of businessmen had begun with the simple idea of beautification, decentralization soon became the predominant trend. In modern New York, the program rapidly became more complex. Planning not just for the city but for the region got under way in the studies that led to the creation of the Port Authority in 1921. A still more extensive and well-publicized regional planning effort was carried forward in the 1920s by the Committee on the Regional Plan. With funding from the Russell Sage Foundation, these planners transformed their vision into a set of guidelines for the planning profession. The plan, Robert Fishman shows, involved an extraordinary team of professionals and served as the reference point for all the regional planning efforts that would follow.

The ideal behind the regional plan was a balanced system of transportation and decentralized industry. The plan's authors understood the peculiarity of New York's industrial base. In their effort to reorder the landscape more rationally, they hypothetically regrouped such activities as printing and garment manufacturing, which required an unusually high level of interaction among all parties, in industrial suburbs. Despite the planners' efforts, urban growth led to undisciplined suburban sprawl. Nevertheless, the plan's importance as the vision of a group of professionals was more important than their predictive

power. Even though planners failed to see that the railroad corporations would never agree to the regulated coordination of their terminals and interchanges or that urban sprawl would wash away their effort at "diffuse centralization," the planners made decentralization an issue that would shape public debates. They also provided a coherent standard by which to judge and criticize suburban sprawl.

Critics of the Regional Plan argued that efforts toward decentralization through improved transportation and zoned land uses created urban sprawl (which found its ultimate expression in Los Angeles). These critics, led by Lewis Mumford, preferred a regulated reconcentration of both people and employment in several discrete clusters within the metropolitan region and, more decisively, an ultimate limit on the population growth of the region. But while the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA) was more idealistic than were pragmatic practitioners, as Fishman notes, both groups took for granted the necessity for government intervention by public agencies.

Yet, the shift from machine politics to a technocracy was uneven. In this volume, Clifton Hood and Jameson Doig contrast the limitations of the subway system, eroded as it was from its inception by old machine politics (saving the fare is a perennial promise at election time), to the extraordinary engineering, financial, and political success of the new Port Authority. Furthermore, even the seemingly neutral language of experts must be understood within its political context. It reflected the progressives' impatience with national oligopolies and their fears about the polarization of urban society. The progressives' intervention by means of the regulatory state began as an effort to restrain corporate capitalism, but in its mature form fluctuated between the control of corporate entities and the direction of the new possibilities of abundance.

Pluralism and Contention for Space

In the end, the intensification of land use made possible by the skyscraper and the expanded transportation infrastructure did not produce the rational city of corporate capitalism; nor did it fully maintain the variegated neighborhoods that characterize a pluralistic society. In fact, the debate about how to articulate vertical expansion and integrated transportation systems failed to address the demands expressed in pluralist politics. At a time when the regional planners were preoccupied with decentralization, the nearby city of tenements developed along its own lines.

This led to conflict for space. With an unusually high number of clerical and skilled manual workers moving to the boroughs, Manhat-

tan increasingly and perhaps inevitably became, early in the century, a city of the very rich and the very poor. Underlying these patterns were traces of an older, active, industrial center of immigrants. This is why remnants of overlapping and conflicting landscapes characterize Manhattan in a way not found in other North American cities. Skyscrapers, monumental avenues, warehouses, sweatshops, tenements, pushcarts on crowded streets, when taken together, form a complex association of congested and incompatible commercial, industrial, and residential land uses.

The rivalry for the streets between the rational city and the pluralistic city took many forms. The modern city is inconceivable without electricity. As David Nasaw shows, electricity not only powered the skyscrapers' elevators but also transformed the city's streets in ways that added yet another dimension to urban subcultures. When, at the turn of the century, commercial entrepreneurs made imaginative use of electricity to build places of public entertainment, they contributed to the melting of otherwise segmented communities in a new world of amusement parks, movie houses, and other forms of commercial leisure. Lighting created new public spaces where a variegated people, defined by class and culture, could blend in a new anonymous crowd. Lighting opened up the streets while preserving individual anonymity.

Daniel Bluestone, in turn, shows that those ethnic communities that appropriated city streets for their economic needs met with increasing resistance from a government that differentiated between public and private land uses and codified a geography of specialization. Thus Fiorello LaGuardia's successful fight against pushcarts marked the victory of the homogenizing and rationalizing tendencies of modernity over immigrant culture. Bluestone shows that the New York City streets were a continuously contested and redefined realm. The free use of streets for traffic became but a part of a larger citywide economic planning and program of ethnic assimilation. It was not implicit in the history of the street itself.

The landscape of modernity therefore is a layered patchwork of scenes, not a rational new landscape. Its components were rarely stable, as Nancy Green shows by detailing the first phases of the garment industry's flight from downtown Manhattan to midtown and to suburban locations close enough to provide overnight delivery. We see here how the Lower East Side, one of the world's most densely populated areas, was largely dismantled through industrial decentralization and suburbanization. Ethnic neighborhoods were not just dispersed, they were transformed or re-created with the relocation of the city's industries.

Conflicts for space often translated into conflicts for identity. To

document the process whereby each group worked out residential, occupational, and cultural strategies of its own, Donna Gabaccia and Deborah Dash Moore study the residential arrangements of the Italian and Jewish communities respectively as they were affected by decentralization. The family relationships and friendship networks among Little Italy residents were partly responses to the investment strategies of the community's insiders who built most of the new tenements. The small Italian investors, however, ultimately gave way to more powerful corporate developers. The forces of large-scale redevelopment forced many second-generation immigrants to decamp for suburban neighborhoods.

In these neighborhoods, second-generation immigrants did not necessarily forget the landscape of their youth. Pluralism persisted. Thus New York's Jews, Deborah Dash Moore explains, re-created the city's apartment culture, although often embellished by a new suburban art deco style. A vernacular landscape emerged from the reconcentration of middle-class Jews in suburbs where they could assimilate apart from other ethnic groups.

The landscape of modernity, then, is much more than the simple product of industrial relocation, the real estate market, the architect's office, the planner's dreams, the government's regulators, and the engineer's system. It is also the product of diverse people shaping neighborhoods. The variegated territory emerges from the competition among different kinds and visions of modernity.

The Circumstances of Modernity

This book captures a long moment—from the turn of the century to the 1940s—when the push and pull of homogenizing rationality and resisting diversity was shaping New York's landscape. But what now seems a foregone conclusion was far from an inevitable process. The metropolis was not shaped by abstract, indirect, larger-than-life forces but by a myriad of actors making a number of specific decisions reflecting their ideals and circumstances. That was true even within the corporate city. Hence, at the heart of our collective investigation is the role of human agency. While American reformers dreamed of the city beautiful and planners conceived of the rational city, poor renters doubled up to meet payments, and immigrant and native investors alike cornered sections of the real estate market. Although some of the large forces transcend individual or local decisions, the shape and content of neighborhoods is the result of their constant interaction.

New York's landscape was also the product of exceptional circum-

stances and unusual personalities who knew how to take advantage of singular conditions. Among them is New York's famous mayor of the Depression, Fiorello LaGuardia. While acknowledging the achievements of Robert Moses, New York's famous "park commissioner" turned master builder, who bound the metropolitan area with highways, bridges, parks, and playgrounds, Thomas Kessner forcefully argues that it was LaGuardia, not Moses, who saw the post-Depression programs as a unique opportunity to complete, with a massive infusion of federal moneys, the modern landscape. LaGuardia showed extraordinary skill in controlling Moses—whose bureaucratic power reputedly removed him from accountability—and in outmaneuvering Washington politicians while putting New Yorkers back to work.

The idea that the Depression opened up possibilities for local governments is not new. Robert and Helen Lynd had already noted in *Middletown in Transition* that Muncie, Indiana, had shunned public improvements in the twenties only to transform its environment under the impetus of the federal government's deficit spending to fight the Depression. As the Lynds put it, "It was manna direct from heaven, and Middletown came back for more, and more, and more."¹² Although New York was the only city in the country rich enough to rebuild itself every ten years, government spending did much to complete the modern structure. Once the structure was in place, Moses could dream up his highways and fill many of the blanks.

Conclusion

As we rediscover the original setting in which the modern urban landscape was first imagined and elaborated, we realize that we continue to encounter some of the conflicts and frustrations that characterized it. To be sure, New York City has evolved a great deal since the 1940s. But while the postwar era seemed to suggest that forces of homogenization would without doubt overcome those of fragmentation, homogenization now appears to have been a short-lived parenthesis in American history. Not long ago, in the seemingly homogeneous early 1960s, Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan reminded Americans in *Beyond the Melting Pot* that ethnic characteristics were resilient. By looking beneath the surface of assimilation, we could find them.¹³ The search beneath the surface is no longer necessary. A new wave of immigrants has forced observers to rethink now obsolete theories of assimilation. Ethnicity is back in full force. The minority population—not only African Americans and Hispanics but also Asians and an array of smaller groups—had increased to become once again a

majority by 1987.¹⁴ Today's social landscape is paradoxically closer to the pluralistic mode of the early twentieth century than to the intervening homogeneity of the mid-twentieth century city.

Yet there are significant differences between our age and the early twentieth century. The flurry of public works that marked the construction of the modern landscape has all but disappeared. No bridges or tunnels have been built since the 1960s, and many older facilities are in disrepair. Politicians and planners seem to have lost the ability to conceive of them or to pay for them. With a sinking physical infrastructure, the landscape of modernity appears old indeed. How, then, shall we rebuild a city where rationality and pluralism meet anew? This book shows that the landscape of a huge city is made up of innumerable small units of life where class and culture intersect with economic imperatives. Rationality and pluralism must not cancel each other. Our challenge as citizens remains to find yet another way to create a space that meets and reflects the aspirations of a diverse people.

Notes

1. Quoted in Martin J. Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890–1916: The Market, The Law, and Politics* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 440.
2. *Twelfth Census of the United States (1900)* (Washington, DC: United States Census Office, 1902), 8:998–999; *Statistical Abstract of the United States (1900)* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1901), p. 126.
3. Le Corbusier, *When the Cathedrals Were White*, Francis E. Hyslop, Jr., trans. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), pp. 34–36.
4. For a convenient summary, see David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 10–38.
5. See Olivier Zunz, "Genèse du pluralisme américain," *Annales: Economies, sociétés, civilisations* 42 (March–April 1987): 429–444; also available as "The Genesis of American Pluralism," *Tocqueville Review* (1987–1988): 201–219.
6. *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography* (1907), Library of America Edition (New York: Viking, 1983), p. 1176.
7. On the issue of the rivalry between Chicago and New York over the design of the first skyscraper, see Winston Weisman, "New York and the Problem of the First Skyscraper," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 12 (March 1953): 13–21.
8. On this episode, see Leon Edel, *Henry James: A Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 611–612.
9. See Marc A. Weiss, "Density and Intervention: New York's Planning Traditions," Chapter 3 in this volume.
10. *Education of Henry Adams*, p. 1176.
11. David Hammack, *Power and Society: Greater New York at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1982), pp. 29–105.
12. Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1937), p. 120.
13. Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1963).
14. On recent social trends in New York City, see John Hull Mollenkopf and Manuel Castells, eds., *Dual City: Restructuring New York* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1991).

3

Density and Intervention: New York's Planning Traditions

Marc A. Weiss

"Make no little plans." Daniel Burnham's famous dictum was written for and about Chicago at the turn of the twentieth century. Yet his large and ambitious vision could equally well have been applied to New York City. Indeed, two of the leading promoters of the 1909 Plan of Chicago, Charles Norton and Frederic Delano, later helped initiate the much grander Regional Plan of New York and its Environs, which played a major role in guiding the infrastructure development of the modern metropolis. New York's regional efforts in the 1920s stood as a direct descendant in a long line of farsighted, massive and highly acclaimed planning efforts, including the 1811 street plan, the creation of the Croton Aqueduct and the water system, the development of Central Park and the park system, the building of the subways, bridges, tunnels, highways, and public housing projects, and many other significant accomplishments. These achievements, while by no means unique in American urban development, were highly influential due to their scale, timing, and level of imagination.¹

One of the best known of these milestones is the passage in 1916 of the New York City Zoning Resolution, frequently hailed as the nation's first zoning law. New York's actions in publicly regulating private development and land use through zoning were widely imitated around the country, as were its earlier efforts in regulating multifamily dwellings through the 1901 Tenement House Law. The assumption that underlay New York's zoning resolution—that restrictions on the use, height, and bulk of all privately owned buildings differentially applied by "districts" or "zones" was legally permissible under the municipal police powers—helped launch a rapidly spreading wave of zoning laws during the 1920s.²

Looked at in the larger context of the evolution of land use regulations in the United States, however, New York's 1916 zoning law was definitely an American pacesetter but not quite for the reasons commonly attributed to it. This is because the primary motivation for zoning on a national basis was the segregation of residential uses from commerce and industry, and especially the creation of exclusive districts for single family houses. Almost all of the many suburban communities that adopted zoning in the 1910s and 1920s had this intention, and most central cities also established zoning fundamentally to help protect certain middle- and upper-income residential neighborhoods. In this sense the first American citywide land use zoning law was passed by the City of Los Angeles in 1908. Los Angeles established, both in legislative and administrative practice and judicially through several key court decisions, the legal validity of regulating and separating land uses for the public purpose of sheltering and nurturing a home environment. New York City essentially adopted and indirectly popularized the Los Angeles model, and applied this approach to winning political support from property owners in zoning certain areas of its outer boroughs.³

New York's pioneering zoning law stands as an anomaly in United States urban history because its basic economic, political, and regulatory thrust had its roots in a very different issue than the mainstream of the early twentieth century zoning movement: (1) New York's law was chiefly designed to resolve conflicts among commercial and industrial property owners in the central business districts of Manhattan. Residential regulation, though an important part of the law, was not the principal focus. (2) The main innovation in the New York law was the height and bulk regulations, not the use restrictions. Although New York was not the first city to control building height or even to create height districts (many cities already had statutory limits, and Boston's height regulations by separate zones had been legally upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1909), it was the first city to use public regulation to rationalize and stimulate the growth and development of a central area for modern corporate office buildings, advanced services, and retail trade.⁴ The story of zoning in New York is primarily the saga of the growth of Manhattan skyscrapers, which is also the main emphasis of this article.

Thomas Adams, who directed the 1920s New York Regional Plan, wrote in 1931 that "the 1916 zoning law was really a temporary measure based on compromise."⁵ Yet the key compromise over height and bulk regulations, which the real estate industry finally recognized in 1916 as necessary to protect the long-term economic viability of commercial property in Manhattan, established a permanent pattern of

active public intervention and private involvement to facilitate large-scale development while attempting to create more open space between buildings, and especially to preserve "open space in the sky." The building setback requirements of the original zoning restrictions were later superseded by the more elaborate "tower-in-the-plaza" approach of the 1961 zoning resolution, which encouraged street level open space around high-rise buildings, and then by a rapid succession of density bonuses and special districts in the past three decades, all far more complex than in any other American city.⁶

Since 1916, New York has consistently led the nation by experimenting with more aspects of zoning regulation, a wider variety of administrative processes, and a greater level of interaction between public regulators and private developers in negotiating building form, public amenities, and urban design standards. Only recently have San Francisco, Boston, and a few other places embarked on interventionist methods of central business district development control that rival New York's. But then, no American city has ever approached the level of density or the number of tall buildings that have long existed in downtown and midtown Manhattan.

The Corporate-Commercial City

In many large and rapidly growing American cities in the early twentieth century there were "City Beautiful" plans written by architects, civil engineers, and landscape architects, and sponsored primarily by downtown corporate and commercial interests. These plans were explicitly designed to establish a central business district of commercial office buildings, department stores, hotels, and other related uses while pushing out factories, warehouses, and wholesale markets. The focus of this urban redevelopment planning was on public investment in civic centers, parks, parkways, rail terminals, and waterfront facilities. Its main purpose was reshaping the physical landscape through public works to generate new patterns of accessibility and movement in the city, showcasing the clean and attractive commercial and cultural districts, and attempting to banish the dirty and unsightly city of industry to working-class neighborhoods removed from the central area. The Chicago Commercial Club's 1909 plan by Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett is a classic of this genre, and many other cities followed a similar path. In each case, from Cleveland to San Francisco, land use conflicts emerged between the commercial and industrial sectors, and this type of central area planning was more successful in some cities than in others.⁷

What makes New York interesting and different is that at the point that most cities were still struggling to assemble a critical mass of tall office buildings, department stores, and hotels that would symbolize the modern downtown, Manhattan was already firmly established as one of the world's leading corporate and commercial centers. This fact explains why New York's zoning law was geared so heavily toward regulating Manhattan commercial real estate when zoning in most communities was more concerned with protecting residential property. It also helps to explain why in New York the height and bulk regulations on commercial buildings adopted in 1916 after nearly two decades of controversial debate were generally supported by key business and real estate interests, whereas in other big cities at that time many comparable business groups strongly opposed height and bulk regulations in proposed zoning laws. New York was already built up with such a great density and volume of large buildings that the corporate-commercial sector turned to public regulation as a necessary measure to facilitate and protect new investment and development without stagnation or chaos, in order to continue growing bigger and taller.

A few statistics give a sense of the contrast between New York and the rest of the country during the period in which zoning laws were first established in most American cities. At the end of 1912, Manhattan had 1,510 buildings from nine to seventeen stories high, and ninety-one buildings between eighteen and fifty-five stories (seventy-one of which were office buildings, with the rest divided between hotels and loft manufacturing buildings). A decade later, during which time new commercial buildings had grown both taller and more numerous, Chicago, the nation's second-largest city with a rapidly expanding downtown, had forty buildings eighteen stories or higher, less than half of Manhattan's total from ten years before. In Chicago's downtown "Loop," where most of the city's high buildings were concentrated, 151 buildings were between nine and seventeen stories, a mere one-tenth of the decade-earlier Manhattan figure. New York not only led the nation in very tall buildings (which in 1912 included a thirty-eight-, a forty-one-, a fifty-one-, and a fifty-five-story office building), but the sheer volume of skyscrapers totally overshadowed any other city. Table 3.1 displays national data for United States cities in 1929, demonstrating that New York had half of all the buildings in America that were ten stories or higher. New York also had most of the tallest commercial structures, from the Woolworth Building, completed in 1913, to the Chrysler Building, which was under construction during 1929.⁸

Table 3.1 Tall Buildings in American Cities, 1929

City	Buildings 10-20 Stories	Buildings 21 Stories or More
Albany, NY	9	2
Atlanta, GA	17	1
Atlantic City, NJ	21	0
Baltimore, MD	36	4
Beaumont, TX	5	1
Birmingham, AL	13	1
Boston, MA	102	2
Chicago, IL	384	65
Cincinnati, OH	24	2
Cleveland, OH	40	4
Columbus, OH	16	1
Dallas, TX	31	1
Dayton, OH	15	0
Denver, CO	9	0
Des Moines, IA	14	0
Detroit, MI	102	19
Duluth, MN	5	0
Forth Worth, TX	11	3
Galveston, TX	5	0
Houston, TX	24	5
Indianapolis, IN	23	0
Jacksonville, FL	14	0
Jersey City, NJ	16	0
Johnstown, PA	5	0
Kalamazoo, MI	5	0
Kansas City, MO	60	2
Knoxville, TN	6	0
Little Rock, AR	6	0
Long Beach, CA	14	0
Los Angeles, CA	134	1
Louisville, KY	17	0
Memphis, TN	23	1
Miami, FL	25	1
Milwaukee, WI	15	1
Minneapolis, MN	32	3
Montgomery, AL	5	0
Nashville, TN	17	0
Newark, NJ	18	3
New Haven, CT	5	0
New Orleans, LA	21	1
New York, NY	2,291	188
Oakland, CA	14	1
Oklahoma City, OK	20	2
Omaha, NE	9	0
Peoria, IL	12	0

Table 3.1 (continued)

City	Buildings 10-20 Stories	Buildings 21 Stories or More
Philadelphia, PA	98	22
Phoenix, AZ	5	0
Pittsburgh, PA	52	15
Portland, OR	25	0
Providence, RI	5	1
Richmond, VA	20	1
Rochester, NY	12	0
Sacramento, CA	7	0
St. Louis, MO	83	3
St. Paul, MN	7	0
Salt Lake City, UT	10	0
San Antonio, TX	21	3
San Diego, CA	8	0
San Francisco, CA	45	8
Seattle, WA	41	2
Springfield, IL	5	0
Stockton, CA	6	0
Syracuse, NY	4	1
Tacoma, WA	6	0
Tampa, FL	11	0
Toledo, OH	6	1
Tulsa, OK	37	2
Washington, DC	20	0
Wheeling, WV	6	0
Wichita, KS	14	0
Wilkes-Barre, PA	5	0
Youngstown, OH	5	0

Source: *The American City* 41 (September 1929): 130.

One of the driving forces behind New York's 1916 zoning resolution was the Fifth Avenue Association, a group of leading retail merchants, hotel operators, property owners, investors, lenders, and real estate brokers trying to stabilize and reinforce the image of Fifth Avenue between Thirty-second and Fifty-ninth streets as a high-class shopping district. The retail merchants' nemesis was the garment industry, which was steadily moving northward along Fifth Avenue, occupying newly constructed tall loft manufacturing buildings. Arguing that "these hordes of factory employees . . . are doing more than any other thing to destroy the exclusiveness of Fifth Avenue," the merchants turned to the city for the legal authority to control private property

through zoning laws, limiting building heights within the district to cut down on the number and size of loft buildings.⁹ Zoning under municipal police power regulations, if properly executed, had the advantages of being compulsory on all property owners without the government having to financially compensate these owners.

If the Fifth Avenue Association could have blocked the rapidly spreading lofts by prohibiting light manufacturing in a commercial zone, it would surely have proposed such intervention. By 1913, however, no city, not even Los Angeles, had yet attempted to segregate such uses, and it did not appear to be legally possible. Height restrictions by district, on the other hand, had been declared constitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1909, so the Fifth Avenue Association seized on and vigorously promoted this idea as the means of its salvation.¹⁰

Fifth Avenue, however, was not really the principal long-term issue. Whereas the Fifth Avenue Association had chosen building height regulation as a method of blocking and redirecting the garment industry's geographic expansion, the main demand in 1916 for regulating the height and bulk of commercial buildings through zoning came from private businesses that leased office space, land and building owners, investors, lenders, insurers, developers, contractors, brokers, lawyers, and others involved in the lower Manhattan real estate market. These real estate and business groups reluctantly agreed that some form of public regulation was necessary, after having opposed commercial height restrictions since they were first suggested in the 1890s.

The 1901 Tenement House Law had imposed height and lot coverage restrictions on multifamily dwellings, but commercial and industrial buildings were still unregulated except by building codes, and the new skyscraper technology had brought much anxiety and uncertainty to the downtown area, where many new tall and bulky buildings blocked the sunlight from older and smaller buildings, causing the latter's property values to drop and in some cases even driving away their tenants. This situation is well illustrated in the accompanying photograph from the 1916 report of the Commission on Building Districts and Restrictions (see Figure 3.1). Though the tenants in the dark buildings could presumably move, and the owners could possibly build a new, taller building, there seemed to be no way to privately ensure that the district would not become strangled by overbuilding and congestion, with each building cutting off the others' sunlight and views, turning the narrow side streets into perpetually dark and impassable canyons. Public regulation was finally perceived by 1916 to be the only viable solution.

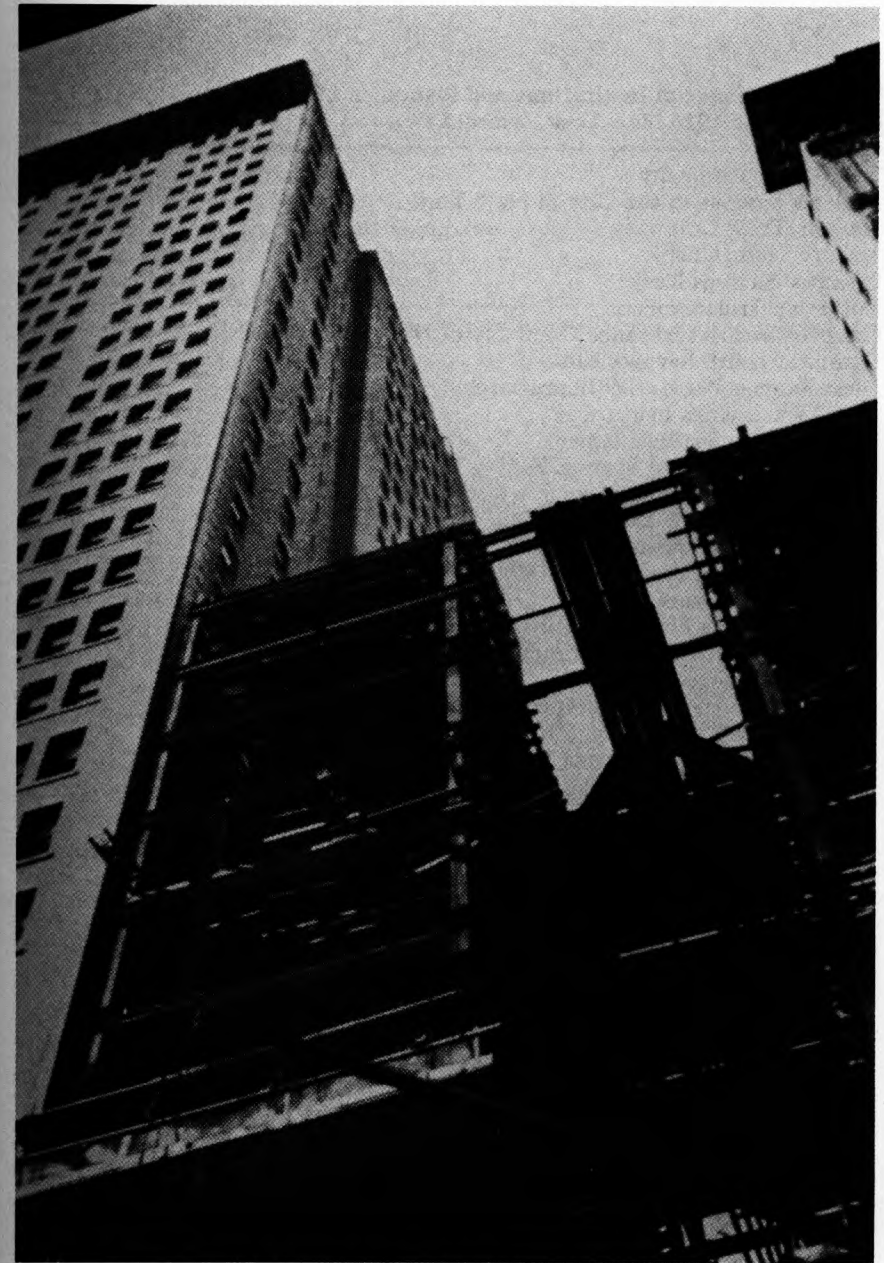


Figure 3.1 The *Final Report* of the 1916 Commission on Building Districts and Restrictions used this photo to demonstrate the necessity for zoning regulations in New York City to reduce the density of skyscrapers and allow more light, air, and open space between tall buildings. *Source:* Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.

Table 3.2 Financial Institutions and Insurance Companies Endorsing the 1916 New York Zoning Law

Astor Trust Company
 Bank for Savings in the City of New York
 Bankers Trust Company
 Bowery Savings Bank
 Citizens' Savings Bank
 Columbia Trust Company
 Commonwealth Insurance Company of New York
 Commonwealth Savings Bank
 Dime Savings Bank of Williamsburgh
 Dry Dock Savings Institution
 East Brooklyn Savings Bank
 Emigrants' Industrial Savings Bank
 Equitable Life Assurance Society of the United States
 Excelsior Savings Bank
 Fidelity Trust Company
 Franklin Savings Bank
 Franklin Trust Company
 German Savings Bank of Brooklyn
 Germania Fire Insurance Company
 Germania Savings Bank
 Globe & Rutgers Fire Insurance Company
 Greater New York Savings Bank
 Guaranty Trust Company of New York
 Harlem Savings Bank
 Home Insurance Company
 Home Life Insurance Company
 Hudson Trust Company
 Imperial Assurance Company
 Irving Savings Institution
 Italian Savings Bank
 Jamaica Savings Bank
 Lawyers Mortgage Company
 Lawyers Title & Trust Company
 Liverpool and London and Globe Insurance Company
 Long Island City Savings Bank
 Manhattan Life Insurance Company
 Metropolitan Life Insurance Company
 Mutual Life Insurance Company of New York
 New York Life Insurance Company
 New York Savings Bank
 New York Title Insurance Company
 North British & Mercantile Insurance Company
 North River Insurance Company
 People's Trust Company
 Postal Life Insurance Company
 Royal Insurance Company
 South Brooklyn Savings Institution
 Sumner Savings Bank

Table 3.2 (continued)

Title Guarantee and Trust Company
 Transatlantic Trust Company
 Union Square Savings Bank
 United States Mortgage & Trust Company
 West Side Savings Bank
 Williamsburgh Savings Bank

Source: *Final Report of the Commission on Building Districts and Restrictions*, pp. 75-76.

Construction of the new Equitable Building had demonstrated the difficulty with private methods of control. When the old nine-story building burned to the ground and plans were announced in 1913 for a massive new forty-story, 1.4 million square foot structure covering an entire city block that would "steal" light, views, and tenants from many surrounding buildings, neighboring property owners organized to stop its construction through private negotiations with the property's owner, but failed in their efforts. After the new building was completed, Lawson Purdy, president of the New York City Department of Taxes and Assessments, testified that "the owners of practically all the property surrounding it have asked for and obtained a reduction of the assessed value of their property on proof of loss of rents due to limitations of light and air and other advantages they enjoyed when the Equitable Building was only nine stories high."¹¹

Many of the institutions that were concerned with long-term real estate market stability were eager to impose the new regulations by the middle of the decade. Large lenders such as the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, the New York Life Insurance Company, and the Lawyers Mortgage Company—a pillar of the New York establishment whose president, Richard Hurd, had written the widely admired *Principles of City Land Values* (1903)—supported the building height and bulk regulations (see Table 3.2). Even the Equitable Life Assurance Society, despite or perhaps because of the dispute over its new headquarters, endorsed the proposed zoning resolution. Walter Stabler, the controller of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company and a member of the Commission on Building Districts and Restrictions, actively encouraged the efforts of the Fifth Avenue Association. Stabler was such a strong advocate for height, bulk, and use restrictions that Edward Bassett, who chaired both the 1913 and 1916 New York zoning commissions and was considered by many to be the leading American zoning expert, dedicated his 1936 book on zoning to Walter Stabler (along with Lawson Purdy and Frederic Pratt). Property, casualty, and

fire insurance companies supported the zoning restrictions, arguing that they would bring greater certainty to realty markets and lower the risks of fire and property damage. Title insurance companies, such as the Title Guarantee and Trust Company, also backed the new zoning regulations.¹²

A vital aspect of development in Manhattan was the growth in corporate headquarters as property owners and space users. Many opponents of tall office buildings argued that higher construction and operating costs and a loss of rentable space due to elevators and reinforcing structures meant that these towers were not as economically profitable as was commonly assumed. However, a key factor behind their continued development and rapid growth in height, bulk, and numbers was the prestige value of the building's visual image, which served as a powerful form of advertising for the corporate owners and occupants. Publicity was becoming more important for many large firms, and constructing an elaborate corporate headquarters was one increasingly popular method of displaying to the general public the company's growing wealth and power.¹³

The Politics of Height and Bulk Restrictions

New York's zoning process was unusual not only for the central attention on the issue of building height and bulk in lower and midtown Manhattan, but also because the corporate-commercial sector and the real estate industry generally supported these restrictions. Indeed, the initiative to establish the new public regulations came partly from these business groups. This contrasts with height limitations in many other American cities, where the issue was either less important relative to use restrictions applied mainly to residential areas, or more controversial and unpopular with various segments of the downtown business and real estate communities.¹⁴

Many cities imposed building height limits beginning in the late nineteenth century when the private "skyscraper" first emerged as a new urban form. Most of the legal limits ranged from 100 to 200 feet. Boston and Washington, D.C., had differential limits for various parts of the city, with the highest buildings permitted in the central area. Other cities, such as Baltimore and Indianapolis, had special restrictions that applied to particular locations. In most cases the height limits were intended mainly to restrict building heights in the downtown area, the only place where land values, transportation accessibility, and corporate image made tall buildings economically feasible or culturally preferable. Much of the early impetus for imposing these restrictions emanated from fears about fire hazards and building safety,

concerns about the lack of sunlight and air, aesthetic considerations that preferred the older European city model of smaller buildings of uniform height, and popular desires to avoid excessive urban population density and congestion.

In some cities, such as Chicago or San Diego, downtown business and realty interests were initially against proposed height limits, asserting that restrictions would impede economic growth and civic progress. Such opposition led to compromises that raised the maximum permitted building heights. Once the limitations were in place, however, many of these same interests did acknowledge that the new regulations helped protect the owners of and tenants in smaller existing buildings, stabilizing investments and markets. Particularly during times of real estate recessions, owners of smaller buildings favored height restrictions.

The commercial and real estate sectors in some cities basically supported height regulations from their inception. Los Angeles imposed a 150-foot building height limit in 1906, following San Francisco's earthquake and fire that same year. Civic leaders of southern California's "Riviera" took this action to reinforce Los Angeles' image of safety and serenity in contrast to more intimidating conceptions of city life in their northern California archrival. Boston's Brahmin business elite was content with older traditions of modest building heights, and also wanted to spread private construction across newly filled land in the Back Bay and other areas near the city's center.

Local chapters of the National Association of Building Owners and Managers (NABOM) were very influential in many cities during this period. NABOM was as important in the development of downtown zoning as the National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB) was in the evolution of residential and suburban zoning. Throughout the 1920s, many Building Owners and Managers groups strongly opposed urban height limitations, sponsoring and publicizing research studies that argued for the commercial superiority of skyscrapers.¹⁵

New York City's successful negotiation of a common agreement on building height and bulk restrictions in 1916 stands in contrast to the controversy that surrounded height limitations in many large cities. In Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and San Francisco, downtown corporate-commercial and major real estate development and investment interests fought against strict height regulations, often with the local NABOM chapter among the leading organizational members of the opposition coalition. In many cases, opposition to regulating building heights held up the passage of an entire zoning ordinance until some kind of accommodation was made. In Chicago and Pittsburgh, compromises were reached by 1923. In San Francisco,

the Downtown Association and the Building Owners and Managers were able to remove all height limitations from the 1921 law, which only regulated land uses. In Philadelphia, Detroit, and Cleveland, opposition from downtown corporations and property owners held up zoning throughout the 1920s, and in Cleveland an ordinance that finally passed in 1928 was quickly repealed two months later. Houston never passed a zoning law, though the downtown lobby eventually supported the idea. Zoning in St. Louis and Los Angeles ran into strong opposition from real estate brokers and developers wanting to build large commercial and residential buildings on wide boulevards that were to be restricted to single family homes. Other cities, including Boston and Washington, D.C., raised their height limits during the 1920s, and Atlanta virtually repealed effective height restrictions by increasing its limits in 1929 from 150 feet to 325 feet with no setback requirements.

What is most interesting about the pattern outside of New York is that the cities with the greatest disagreements about the public control of private building heights were essentially the cities with the tallest buildings. Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Houston, and Cleveland, after New York, were the leading cities with buildings twenty-one stories or higher (see Table 3.1). Two factors account for the differences between zoning politics in New York and these other cities. One difference is that New York's law was passed during a period when the real estate market was in a cyclical downturn. Zoning was seen by the main economic actors as a means of stabilizing the city's economy, spreading out property values, and creating incentives for new investment. Major corporate and financial interests were strongly motivated to give this new form of government intervention a chance, and speculative operators who would normally oppose such regulations were in a weak financial and political position due to the real estate recession.¹⁶ By the time New York's example spread and zoning was proposed in other big cities during the early 1920s, their real estate markets were beginning to boom, and property owners, developers, investors, lenders, builders, brokers, corporate tenants, and other major forces all wanted to profit from economic growth without public intervention standing in the way. They wanted to maximize the development potential of their individual parcels while demand was strong. Once the markets collapsed, height regulations once again appeared desirable as a stabilizing factor. This helps explain why Philadelphia, Detroit, and Cleveland waited until the Great Depression before they finally imposed zoning restrictions on their cities.

The second difference is that in New York a complex bargain was struck, establishing what is now a tradition of the city's zoning regula-

tions permitting and encouraging very large-scale private development while still attempting to accomplish certain important public goals. Under the 1916 zoning resolution, New York pioneered a new form of regulation that combined restrictions on height, bulk, and use in one law. Since the issue in lower and midtown Manhattan, other than the Fifth Avenue merchants' conflict with the garment industry, revolved around the problem that tall and bulky buildings blocked sunlight from neighboring buildings and from the streets, the solution was to redesign buildings so that they would allow more space between them and more room for sunlight and open air. This was accomplished through the setback requirements, regulating buildings by volume rather than height alone. Regulating building height and volume in relation to the width of the street and the size of the parcel allowed buildings in some zones to be very tall by requiring progressively stepped-back towers above a certain height determined as a multiple of the width of the fronting street. This approach permitted development while preserving public open-air space because, as buildings went higher, the upper stories drew further back from the streets and lot lines and from surrounding buildings (see Figure 3.2). What was prohibited was *not* tall buildings per se, just bulky, monolithic fortresses covering the entire lot, like the Equitable Building. Such a compromise in 1916 made possible the construction fifteen years later of the world's tallest structure, the Empire State Building, which was legally zoned to soar over Manhattan because it encompassed a very large lot, fronted on relatively wide streets, and utilized numerous setbacks in the building's design.

Why didn't other big cities adopt similar compromises? Eventually, many of them did. It took time for enough people to see the effects of New York's zoning regulations worked out in practice, and during the boom of the early and middle 1920s many private business interests preferred not to rock the boat, wanting only traditional commercial structures and existing government regulations, or no regulations at all. Eventually, most commercial architects, builders, investors, lenders, insurers, corporate tenants, and owners began to accept the new post-zoning New York model of setback skyscraper development and to want to import it to their city or export it to other cities. By the late 1920s, many big cities were changing their zoning laws to adopt "volumetric" controls and the setback system for tall buildings. New York's height and bulk zoning had actually created a popular new aesthetic standard that was beginning to dominate American skylines. Even conservative Boston, which had regulated building heights since 1890 with a flat and relatively low maximum in the downtown area, changed its zoning law in 1928 to permit pyramidal setback towers.



Figure 3.2 The New Yorker Hotel, completed in 1930, is a good example of "sculptured mountain" skyscraper architecture popular in the 1920s and 1930s, encouraged by the building setback requirements of New York City's zoning law. Urban planners, including the authors of the *Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs*, appreciated the setbacks and argued that high-rise structures should be situated farther away from surrounding buildings and streets than was mandated by the existing zoning. *Source:* Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.

Part of the motivation for Boston's change was pressure from both local and national corporations for the city to modernize its image, along with the desire by public officials to attract outside capital and to promote new investment in a central business district that was far from booming.¹⁷

Implementation of the 1916 New York Zoning Law

The imposition of restrictions on the height, bulk, and use of commercial buildings in New York, after more than two decades of sometimes acrimonious debate, was generally received by the real estate industry as an acceptable compromise. Some real estate developers were unhappy with the height limits, and several of them appealed to the city for reductions in property tax assessments on the grounds that zoning had caused a decline in values. The Real Estate Board of New York disagreed, strongly endorsing the ordinance in November 1916 and announcing that it would help the city defend its constitutionality in court.¹⁸

In February 1917, leaders of the Fifth Avenue Association and other key zoning advocates formed the New York Zoning Committee to mobilize ongoing private sector support for the new law. The Committee worked with the city's Corporation Counsel to protect the legality of zoning, provide technical assistance in its implementation, and publish pamphlets explaining the new regulations to the general public. Frederic B. Pratt, dean of the Pratt Institute and son of one of New York's leading industrialists, chaired the Zoning Committee; Walter Stabler of Metropolitan Life was the treasurer; and Edward Bassett served as general counsel. Within five months the committee had over 100 members and was actively working to maintain public acceptance during the critical early period of zoning implementation.¹⁹ Robert E. Simon, a commercial real estate developer and leader of the New York Zoning Committee, stated in 1918:

Never before in the history of this City has a restrictive measure of so radical a nature, affecting real estate, received so nearly unanimous approval of the real estate interests in the City as did this law. Now that it has been in effect sufficiently long to give it an opportunity to be thoroughly tested, it still has the approval of a vast majority.²⁰

A vital factor in this broad support for zoning was the improved condition of the Manhattan real estate market after the law's passage in 1916, reversing several years of declining property values. According

to the Central Mercantile Association, investment in new buildings between Canal and Thirty-fourth streets increased dramatically after zoning was initiated. Demand for office space rose significantly in lower Manhattan, particularly after the war, and rents were rising substantially, leading to the boom in construction and real estate prices beginning in the early 1920s.²¹

The new zoning law succeeded in defining Fifth Avenue and the midtown area as an office and retail district, rather than an expanding location for garment manufacturing. The Save New York Committee reported in December 1916 that 205 out of 225 manufacturers between Thirty-second and Fifty-ninth streets and Third and Seventh avenues had agreed to relocate from their current buildings by the time their leases expired. Despite this accomplishment, the Fifth Avenue retailers were concerned that too much light manufacturing was still being permitted under the 1916 zoning use district category for "business." To accelerate the pace of change and protect against future encroachment, in 1923 the Save New York Committee proposed the creation of a "retail" use district category in the zoning law. A retail district would permit the same uses as a business district except that manufacturing would be prohibited within the retail zone. Walter Stabler, Edward Bassett, and Charles G. Edwards, president of the Real Estate Board of New York, were among those endorsing the retail zone amendment.²²

The Fifth Avenue Association was joined by similar associations representing merchants, property owners, and tenants on Broadway, Thirty-fourth Street, Eighth Avenue, and Forty-second Street in lobbying the Board of Estimate for the retail amendment. These groups were opposed on one side by garment manufacturers and wholesalers fighting to retain the business use designation, and on the other side by elite residents of Murray Hill and portions of Fifth and Madison avenues who wanted to preserve their neighborhoods as residential use districts. Finally in 1929 the Board of Estimate created a retail use district category restricting manufacturing activity to a maximum of 5 percent of the total floor space in any building in that zone (25 percent manufacturing was permitted in "business" use districts under the 1916 zoning resolution). Like all the provisions of the law, it was not retroactive and only applied to new development. At the same time, the Board of Estimate designated much of the area between Twenty-third and Fiftieth streets from Park to Eighth avenues as a retail district.²³

In the 1920s Fifth Avenue above Thirty-fourth Street solidified as the elite shopping district, surrounded by a steadily increasing amount of new office space for corporate tenants, some of them migrating

northward from Wall Street to midtown. As early as 1920 the Heckscher Building, a thirty-two-story office tower, was constructed at Fifth Avenue and Fifty-seventh Street, and S. W. Straus, the leading mortgage bond brokerage firm, built a tall headquarters at Fifth Avenue and Forty-sixth Street. By mid-decade the pace of office construction in the midtown area was rapidly accelerating.²⁴

One of the most dramatic effects of zoning was on the architecture of New York's skyline (see Figure 3.2). Bulky rectangular buildings were replaced by (1) ziggurat-style "wedding cake" setback buildings, such as the ubiquitous tall loft structures of the new garment district; (2) buildings that looked like sculptured mountains with numerous imposing setbacks; (3) most prominently, very tall but relatively slender and graceful setback towers. All of these new building sizes and shapes conformed to the zoning restrictions on height and bulk. The Chrysler, Empire State, and other famous buildings of the 1920s and 1930s serve as monuments to zoning's impact on urban design in New York and around the world.²⁵

The spread of new midtown office towers was reflected in the height district zoning changes for Manhattan taken by the Board of Estimate between 1916 and 1931. Many of the rezoning actions were designed to permit the development of skyscrapers in areas originally zoned for lesser heights. All but one of the fourteen decisions of this type were in midtown. The biggest change occurred in 1928, when the Board of Estimate rezoned all of Eighth Avenue from Thirty-third to Fifty-sixth streets as a "two times" height district, allowing for very tall buildings.²⁶

Occasionally, a zoning conflict was resolved against the wishes of real estate developers. One of the most publicized examples of a developer defeat involved the Equitable Life Assurance Society, principal occupant of the bulky skyscraper in lower Manhattan that had been such an important catalyst for the imposition of height and bulk restrictions in 1916. Equitable intended to relocate some of its clerical staff from downtown to midtown in a new building the firm planned to construct on Seventh Avenue between Thirty-first and Thirty-second streets. The proposed building, nineteen stories without any setbacks, did not conform to the height regulations for that district. Equitable asked for a zoning variance, but the Board of Standards and Appeals denied the insurance company's request in 1922.²⁷

The rash of skyscraper development, at first reflecting the widespread acceptance of the zoning regulations as well as the new aesthetic of setback architecture, reached such an unprecedented volume by 1926 that the previous enthusiasm for the 1916 compromise turned into dissatisfaction and controversy. Critics began to voice serious

objections to the existing height and bulk regulations permitting too many new buildings that were still far too tall and massive, despite the setbacks and the restrictions. One of the most virulent skyscraper opponents was Major Henry Curran, counsel of the City Club of New York, who denounced the buildings as "monsters" and their spread as a "plague." Curran blamed them for subway crowding and automobile accidents, called for an absolute height limit of six stories on narrow streets and ten stories on wide streets, and recommended that tall building design be regulated by the Municipal Art Commission.²⁸

William A. Boring, director of Columbia University's School of Architecture, endorsed Henry Curran's proposed ban on skyscrapers and advocated a special tax on tall buildings. The Committee on Community Planning of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), chaired by Henry Wright, also supported Curran's proposals. Wright suggested in 1927 that skyscrapers should provide public open spaces in amounts proportionate to their cubic capacity, an idea that was later partially incorporated into the 1961 zoning law through density bonuses awarded for plazas surrounding tall buildings. The concern of Henry Wright and his AIA committee for open space was also voiced by the Municipal Art Society. Its City Plan Committee denounced the overdevelopment of skyscrapers and the consequent urban congestion, arguing that "we cannot have a beautiful city without a proper adjustment of spaces to buildings."²⁹

By the mid-1920s, even some of the 1916 zoning law's strongest supporters were beginning to call for changes, frustrated with the seeming lack of any real control over the advancing juggernaut of skyscraper construction in Manhattan. Edward Bassett, sharing a platform with Henry Curran at the Municipal Art Society in 1926, agreed that the zoning law should be modified to further reduce congestion in Manhattan by promoting decentralization of commercial development throughout the city and region. Earlier in the year, J. E. Harrington, chairman of the Traffic Committee for the Broadway Association, blamed the excessive number, size, and growth of skyscrapers for transit and traffic congestion and stated that "the Zoning Law in New York has outgrown itself and needs revision."³⁰

Edward Bassett joined other critics of skyscrapers in opposing the Board of Estimate's upzoning of the midtown section of Eighth Avenue in 1928 to permit the construction of taller buildings. "The greatest present problem is congestion," Bassett asserted, and while politically "it may be impossible to decrease the cubage zoning limit," he nevertheless strongly argued that "successive Boards of Estimate ought to refrain from establishing new skyscraper districts."³¹ Bassett also appeared before the Board of Estimate in 1931 to oppose the height dis-

trict upzoning of Forty-second Street between Eighth and Tenth avenues. The proposed change had the support of the Forty-second Street Property Owners and Merchants Association, hoping that the new thirty-two-story McGraw-Hill Building would spawn a skyscraper development boom in their district. In 1932, the Board of Estimate passed the zoning map amendment over Bassett's objections. By the late 1920s, Bassett was also frequently denouncing the wholesale granting of zoning variances by the Board of Standards and Appeals. Some of these variances were later overturned in court as being legally improper, and Bassett claimed that the appeals board's actions were corrupting the process of zoning.³²

Zoning reformers banded together to lobby for changes through the City Committee on Plan and Survey appointed by Mayor Walker in 1926. The Sub-Committee on Housing, Zoning and Distribution of Population was headed by Frederick H. Ecker, chairman of Metropolitan Life. On this subcommittee, Lawson Purdy chaired a study of zoning height and area regulations, and Edward Bassett chaired a study of zoning administration. The Purdy report proposed that height limits generally be lowered and that there be three standard building heights for the entire city, replacing the formula for multiples of street widths. In particular, his report proposed a drastic reduction in building heights along the wide avenues and of the corner buildings on the cross streets. It also recommended other changes to increase open space by trading off increased building height for decreased lot coverage, foreshadowing the 1961 zoning law.³³

The 1928 *Report of the City Committee on Plan and Survey* endorsed the zoning changes proposed by Purdy's study group, stating that "The time is ripe for amendment and strengthening of the Zoning Resolution which was passed into law eleven years ago." The full committee also supported the establishment of a separate retail use district category, which was endorsed by Bassett's study. In addition, the committee advocated that the Board of Estimate create "an official Planning Board functioning as a permanent city department." Among its many other functions, the proposed planning board would have the authority to review and recommend zoning changes:

This would permit a more constructive approach being made to the zoning of the City than has been the case in the past in the absence of a comprehensive plan. In the final analysis the solution of the problems of congestion and of distribution of population will depend on the principles and methods which are applied to the regulation of building uses and densities, and the relation of these to the street and other open areas of the City.³⁴

The new city charter adopted in 1938 finally established a City Planning Commission along the lines suggested by the Committee ten years earlier. The City Committee on Plan and Survey's endorsement of the retail district zoning amendment had a more immediate impact on the Board of Estimate, which passed a compromise version in 1929. However, the committee's proposed changes in height and area restrictions ran into too much opposition from real estate developers and property owners to succeed politically.

Manhattan Borough President Julius Miller and New York City Tax Commissioner George H. Payne were two prominent public officials who opposed new height restrictions. Miller believed that tall buildings were necessary for the city's economic vitality, and that the problems of congestion could be solved without curbing the development of skyscrapers in Manhattan. He proposed alleviating traffic congestion by constructing subways under major crosstown streets, express highways on the riverfront, and tunnels to the outer boroughs. The new City Planning commissioner, John F. Sullivan, appointed by Mayor Walker in 1930 to head a one-man agency with no power over zoning or any other land use matters, also was on the side of supporting skyscraper development. For example, he favored the upzoning of Forty-second Street between Eighth and Tenth avenues, which passed the Board of Estimate in 1932. The opponents of stricter height and bulk limitations mostly prevailed during the renewed zoning debates and controversies of the late 1920s, and the Board of Estimate rejected various amendments recommended by the City Committee on Plan and Survey and other civic groups such as the Municipal Art Society, the City Club, and the AIA Committee on Community Planning.³⁵

Thomas Adams, who directed New York's metropolitan regional planning during the 1920s, addressed the Building Managers and Owners Association of New York in 1928 about the Purdy report proposing greater zoning restrictions on height and bulk, and acknowledged that "It may appear that certain details of the recommendations of the Sub-Committee go much further than the Association would approve. . . ."³⁶ Whereas chapters of NABOM in several other cities were bitterly opposed to any regulations limiting the height of buildings, the New York chapter was generally content with the zoning compromise of 1916 but did not support further reductions in the permitted size of commercial structures.

New Yorkers provided national leadership for building owners and managers in the 1920s: Clarence T. Coley, manager of the Equitable Building, served as NABOM president during 1921–1922; and Lee Thompson Smith, manager of the Sinclair Oil Building, was president of NABOM from 1924 to 1926. During Smith's presidency, NABOM's

Height Limitation Committee launched a sophisticated public relations campaign by sponsoring research that argued for the economic and social benefits of tall buildings and disputed charges that skyscrapers caused congestion or were unsafe. NABOM emphasized that advances in building design, construction, and materials, such as the use of setbacks and lightweight terra cotta that reflected sunlight, mitigated problems of light, air, views, and open space.³⁷

Probably the most significant efforts at finding a new compromise formula for zoning to reduce densities and congestion while attempting to satisfy both the real estate industry and its critics came from the Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs, directed by Thomas Adams and involving many of the key architects, planners, lawyers, and community leaders behind New York's zoning law: Edward Bassett, Lawson Purdy, George Ford, Robert Whitten, George McAneny, Frederic Pratt, and numerous others. Thomas Adams was sympathetic to Henry Curran's ideas and the movement against skyscrapers, and, like Bassett, opposed the upzoning of Eighth Avenue in 1928. Adams believed that tall buildings per se were not a problem if land patterns around the skyscrapers were better planned and regulated: "The high building in itself cannot be condemned as unhealthful if there is sufficient space around it to give it light and air; nor as inefficient if there is sufficient space for the people and traffic to serve its needs."³⁸ He argued that in the debate over height limitations, people must "distinguish between, first, the high building that has ample space surrounding it to meet all its need for light, air and accessibility, and second, the crowded groups of high buildings where these essential elements in land values are destroyed as a result of too intensive concentration."³⁹

In several key publications of 1931 (volume 6 of the Regional Survey of New York and Its Environs, volume 2 of the Regional Plan, and volume 2 of the Harvard City Planning Studies) Thomas Adams, George Ford, and their colleagues began to work out ideas for continuing to reduce the bulk of tall buildings through less lot coverage at the street level, greater setbacks of the building's lower stories, and slimmer towers.⁴⁰ Adams and Ford discussed limiting height and bulk by regulating the total volume of building space in relation to land mass, citing the architect Raymond Hood's ideas about controlling building volume through a maximum floor-area ratio. Three decades later, New York City adopted a variation of this approach as a new and more effective method of controlling building density while still permitting the construction of skyscrapers.

The Regional Plan Association pointed in particular to New York's and the world's tallest structure, the Empire State Building, completed

in 1931, as a model skyscraper with sufficient open space surrounding it on the street level and in the sky. In an important rebuttal to NABOM-type arguments over economic efficiency, Adams and his colleagues argued that the older practice of crowding urban land and commercial districts with tall buildings cheek-by-jowl had given way to new techniques of skyscraper planning and development that were the wave of the future: "The rectangular prism remains the most economical framework for a building. But economy of construction is not true economy if the building is not rentable at a profit. As the best lighted space brings the highest rents, this gives the economic justification for wide setbacks."⁴¹

Conclusion

By 1931, Edward Bassett was critical of the zoning compromise he had so carefully fashioned fifteen years earlier, and was looking ahead to the next generation of height and bulk restrictions that were widely discussed in New York beginning in 1926:

The regulation of skyscrapers is undoubtedly the most difficult problem of zoning in every great city. After the zoning plan of New York City had been worked upon for years, it was nearly defeated at a certain stage by reason of a spirited and influential attack on limitation of skyscrapers. The same difficulty has been mainly responsible for the fact that Philadelphia and Detroit have no zoning ordinances today. New York City did not advance very far when it adopted the two and two and one-half times limit with setbacks and 25 percent towers, and there are many who say that with this limit the skyscraper problem was hardly touched, that skyscrapers are being erected as high as they probably would have been without zoning, that the total rentable floor space in the high building blocks has not been affected, and that street congestion is as great as if buildings had been left unregulated. These criticisms are partly true. On the whole, however, the results of zoning have been to give greater access of light and air to separate buildings and to the street. The opportunity of blanketing one building by another has been lessened. Architecturally New York has been greatly improved by zoning. What more can be done? Nearly all will admit that something ought to be done. But to say what ought to be done and to say what can be done are two quite different things.⁴²

After a decade of experience with regulating the height and bulk of commercial buildings, New Yorkers were contemplating doing more by the late 1920s. Residential structures received a new set of

regulations with the Multiple Dwelling Law of 1929, and ideas for rezoning were being discussed, leading in 1961 to the floor-area ratio concept and new sky exposure planes. With the 1961 zoning law the "wedding cake" setback buildings were shunted aside to herald a new era of modernist architecture with tall "glass boxes" rising straight up from the street, leaving more open space around the buildings to allow sunlight and views on every floor. The concept of "open space in the sky" was brought down to street level as the new zoning permitted a 20 percent larger building in exchange for the construction of a plaza made available for public use. Between 1961 and 1973 virtually every major development project in New York took advantage of the zoning density bonus to build taller and bulkier buildings, constructing over one million square feet of plaza space, more than the total in all other U.S. cities combined. Incentive zoning proved controversial; one study of density bonuses in New York found that for every dollar developers had spent on constructing plazas, they earned an additional \$48 from the increased value of the buildings due to the extra rentable space they were permitted to build. Despite much criticism, the city government later initiated many other density bonus trade-offs under incentive zoning, especially through the method of creating special districts. Bonuses were granted both as-of-right and by negotiation and special permit for providing a variety of amenities that included sidewalk arcades; indoor public spaces such as atria, retail stores, museums, live theaters, and dance studios; pedestrian passageways; subway station improvements; and affordable housing. As two expert zoning observers commented in 1979, "It is as pointless to talk about special districts without a focus on New York as it would be to discuss the steel industry and ignore Pittsburgh and Chicago. The New York City Planning Commission, these last ten years, has been cranking out special districts as though they could be used to redeem anemic municipal bonds."⁴³

In 1975, New York City instituted an elaborate Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP), officially incorporating the demand for greater citizen participation through the fifty-nine Community Boards. Despite this and other more recent reforms, including a new charter and land use planning system beginning in 1990, zoning in New York continues to be extremely contentious. Yet each new compromise from 1916 forward has had the essential backing of key corporate and development interests. Zoning has also become increasingly interventionist, adding more layers of complexity to address urban physical problems and conflicts that threaten quality of life, economic stability, and property values. Most contradictory, New York has evolved as an innovative leader in urban planning and zoning, yet with a set of prob-

lems substantially different from most other cities. The extremely high levels of population and building density, especially in Manhattan, have required a greater degree of real estate market intervention in order to maintain an adequately functioning metropolis.

Since the 1960s, the "Manhattanization" of central business districts has been an explicit urban planning and economic development policy goal, in many cases the main purpose of large-scale urban redevelopment and renewal projects. Density, intervention, and political controversies about the impacts of downtown commercial development that were pioneered in New York City are being repeated across urban America, and new experiments with sophisticated and complex downtown zoning regulations have spread to numerous cities coast to coast, from Boston and Hartford to San Francisco and Seattle.⁴⁴ As these planning debates unfold, interest in the origins of zoning for the modern corporate-commercial city leads one back to the New York law of 1916 and its implementation during the real estate boom and bust of the 1920s and 1930s.

Notes

1. Three useful essays on New York planning are Kenneth T. Jackson, "The Capital of Capitalism: The New York Metropolitan Region, 1890-1940," in Anthony Sutcliffe, ed., *Metropolis, 1890-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); John Mollenkopf, "City Planning," in Charles Brecher and Raymond D. Horton, eds., *Setting Municipal Priorities, 1990* (New York: New York University Press, 1989); and Paul Goldberger, "Shaping the Face of New York," in Peter D. Salins, ed., *New York Unbound* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988). On Chicago planning, see Marc A. Weiss and John T. Metzger, "Chicago: The Changing Politics of Metropolitan Growth and Neighborhood Development," in Robert A. Beauregard, ed., *Atop the Urban Hierarchy* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1989).
2. On New York's 1916 zoning resolution, see S. J. Makielski, Jr., *The Politics of Zoning: The New York Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966); Seymour I. Toll, *Zoned American* (New York: Grossman, 1969); Harvey A. Kantor, "Modern Urban Planning in New York City: Origins and Evolution, 1890-1933." Ph.D. diss. (New York University, 1971); Marc A. Weiss, "Skyscraper Zoning: New York's Pioneering Role," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 58 (Spring 1992). The reports of the two zoning commissions are vital documents. See *Report of the Heights of Buildings Commission* (December 23, 1913); and *Commission on Building Districts and Restrictions, Final Report* (New York: Board of Estimate and Apportionment, Committee on the City Plan, 1916; hereafter CBDR, *Final Report*). On height and bulk restrictions for residential buildings before 1916 zoning, see Roy Lubove,

- The Progressives and the Slums: Tenement House Reform in New York, 1890-1917* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963); 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).
3. For analysis of Los Angeles' 1908 zoning law and its effects on the national origins and spread of residential zoning, see Marc A. Weiss, *The Rise of the Community Builders: The American Real Estate Industry and Urban Land Planning* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987). The U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the legality of Los Angeles zoning in a 1915 decision, *Hadcheck v. Sebastian*, which served as an important precedent for New York's 1916 zoning resolution.
 4. The 1909 U.S. Supreme Court decision upholding Boston's height limitation districts is *Welch v. Swasey*. On height regulations in Boston from 1891 to 1928, see Michael Holleran and Robert M. Fogelson, "'The Sacred Skyline': Boston's Opposition to the Skyscraper, 1891-1928," Working Paper No. 9 (Cambridge: MIT Center for Real Estate Development, August 1987).
 5. Thomas Adams, "The Character, Bulk, and Surroundings of Buildings," in *Regional Survey of New York and Its Environs, Buildings: Their Uses and the Spaces About Them* (New York: RSNYE, 1931), p. 119.
 6. On the post-1916 evolution, see S. J. Makielski, *Politics of Zoning*; RSNYE, *Buildings*; Norman Marcus and Marilyn W. Groves, eds., *The New Zoning: Legal, Administrative, and Economic Concepts and Techniques* (New York: Praeger, 1970); Jonathan Barnett, *An Introduction to Urban Design* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982); William H. Whyte, *City: Rediscovering the Center* (New York: Doubleday, 1988); Michael Kwartler, "Legislating Aesthetics," in Charles M. Haar and Jerold S. Kayden, eds., *Zoning and the American Dream* (Chicago: Planners Press, 1989); Katherine Kennedy and Mitchell S. Bernard, *New York City Zoning: The Need for Reform* (New York: Natural Resources Defense Council, 1989); Richard F. Babcock and Wendy U. Larsen, *Special Districts: The Ultimate in Neighborhood Zoning* (Cambridge: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 1990); special issue: "Real Estate Development and City Regulations," *New York Affairs* 8 (1985); Weiss, "Skyscraper Zoning."
 7. George B. Ford, *City Planning Progress in the United States* (Washington, DC: American Institute of Architects, 1917); William H. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Judd Kahn, *Imperial San Francisco: Politics and Planning in an American City, 1897-1906* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1979); Weiss and Metzger, "Chicago."
 8. Data comes from *Report of the Heights of Buildings Commission*, pp. 15-17; Chicago Real Estate Board, *Studies on Building Height Limitations in Large Cities* (1923), pp. 24 and 26 (map); "A Census of Skyscrapers," *American City* 41 (September 1929): 130. For additional information on New York buildings in the 1920s and 1930s, see Adams, "Character," pp. 54-64; Robert H. Armstrong and Homer Hoyt, *Decentralization in New York City* (New York: Urban Land Institute, 1941), 122-147. Carl W. Condit, *The Chicago School of Architecture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), gives a detailed picture of downtown Chicago buildings from 1875 to 1925.

9. "Statement by Mr. Frank D. Veiller, Representing the Fifth Avenue Association, June 19, 1913," *Report of the Heights of Buildings Commission*, p. 269. The Fifth Avenue Association also published a separate book that included all of its arguments for height restrictions in its neighborhood. See *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*. Emanuel Tobier, "Manhattan's Business District in the Industrial Age," in John H. Mollenkopf, ed., *Power, Culture, and Place* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1988), analyzes the growth of loft manufacturing in New York and the land use conflict with commercial properties such as office buildings, department stores, and hotels.
10. "Statement by Frank Veiller," p. 270: "In case the occupancy of the building cannot be regulated either through the factory commission or otherwise, the next best step would be in the limitation of the height of buildings in this zone, thereby diminishing the volume of operatives and making a uniform sky line." New York City's Board of Estimate and Apportionment established a Heights of Buildings Commission in 1913 at least in part at the urging of the Fifth Avenue Association, with the explicit purpose of recommending height regulations on Fifth Avenue above Thirty-second Street.
11. "Statement by Lawson Purdy, President, Department of Taxes and Assessments, May 8, 1916," in CBDR, *Final Report*, p. 168. Purdy in his 1916 testimony, Seymour Toll in *Zoned American*, and Edward Bassett in a speech (Chicago Real Estate Board, *Studies on Building Height Limitations*, pp. 236-237) discuss the efforts of the property owners to privately organize against the Equitable Building. Their accounts conflict on several points, but each of them argues that the failure of these private efforts helped convince the building owners that public regulation would be necessary. Also, one of the leaders of the attempt to stop the new Equitable Building was George T. Mortimer, vice-president of the United States Realty Company that owned two buildings across the street from 120 Broadway as well as several other tall buildings nearby. Mortimer served on both the 1913 and the 1916 zoning commissions, and was a strong advocate for height and bulk restrictions on commercial buildings.
12. "This book is dedicated by the author to Frederic B. Pratt, Lawson Purdy and Walter Stabler," Edward M. Bassett, *Zoning: The Laws, Administration, and Court Decisions During the First Twenty Years* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1936). Richard M. Hurd, *Principles of City Land Values* (New York: Real Estate Record and Guide, 1903). The Lawyers Mortgage Company, which by 1916 had made \$465 million in first-mortgage loans on "improved income-producing business or residence property in the most desirable sections of New York City," was so ardently in favor of zoning that it published a handbook explaining the New York zoning resolution through text and maps. See George B. Ford, *Building Zones* (New York: Lawyers Mortgage Company, 1916).
13. When Frank Woolworth paid \$13 million in cash to build a nearly 800-foot office tower that became New York's tallest building in 1913, he was warned by his general contractor, Louis Horowitz, president of the Thompson-Starrett Company, that the building might be too costly and not yield an acceptable return. According to Horowitz, Frank Woolworth

- replied that "the Woolworth Building was going to be like a giant sign-board to advertise around the world his spreading chain of five-and-ten-cent stores. On that basis, of course, his splendid building was a sound investment." Louis J. Horowitz and Boyden Sparkes, *The Towers of New York: The Memoirs of a Master Builder* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1937), p. 2. On early corporate office headquarters buildings, see Kenneth T. Gibbs, *Business Architectural Imagery in America, 1870-1930* (New York: Arno, 1984); Mona Domosh, "The Symbolism of the Skyscraper: Case Studies of New York's First Tall Buildings," *Journal of Urban History* 14 (May 1988): 320-345; Robert A. M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, and John Massengale, *New York 1900: Metropolitan Architecture and Urbanism, 1890-1915* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983). For more recent office development, see Tom Schactman, *Skyscraper Dreams: The Great Real Estate Dynasties of New York* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1991); Karl Sabbagh, *Skyscraper: The Making of a Building* (New York: Viking, 1989).
14. The discussion in this section draws from a number of sources, including Weiss, *Community Builders*; Bassett, *Zoning*; *Report of the Heights of Buildings Commission*; Chicago Real Estate Board, *Studies in Building Height Limitations*; Theodora Kimball Hubbard and Henry Vincent Hubbard, *Our Cities To-Day and To-Morrow* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929); George B. Ford, *Building Height, Bulk, and Form* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931); Norman L. Knauss, *Zoned Municipalities in the United States* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, 1931); RSNYE, *Buildings*; Barbara J. Flint, "Zoning and Residential Segregation: A Social and Physical History, 1910-1940." Ph.D. diss. (University of Chicago, 1977); Garrett Power, "High Society: The Building Height Limitation on Baltimore's Mt. Vernon Place," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 79 (Fall 1984): 197-219; Marc A. Weiss, "The Real Estate Industry and the Politics of Zoning in San Francisco, 1914-1928," *Planning Perspectives* 3 (September 1988): 311-324; J. M. Neil, "Paris or New York: The Shaping of Downtown Seattle, 1903-1914," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 75 (January 1988): 22-33; Holleran and Fogelson, "Sacred Skyline"; Charles M. Nichols, *Zoning in Chicago* (Chicago: Chicago Real Estate Board, 1923); Toll, *Zoned American*; Wilson, *City Beautiful*; Houston Chamber of Commerce, *What Other Cities Say About Zoning* (Houston: Chamber of Commerce, 1946); Weiss, "Skyscraper Zoning." Though Cleveland did not have a zoning law during the 1920s, it did have a 250-foot height limit. The proposed zoning would have lowered this limit, which is one reason why downtown business and real estate interests opposed the zoning bill.
 15. On NABOM, see Earle Shultz and Walter Simmons, *Offices in the Sky* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959); annual *Proceedings of the National Association of Building Owners and Managers* and their other publications, including *Buildings* and *Skyscraper Management*. On NAREB and zoning, see Weiss, *Community Builders*. NABOM is now the Building Owners and Managers Association International, and NAREB is now the National Association of Realtors. An influential, widely discussed, and NABOM-inspired book of the period was W. C. Clark and J. L. Kingston, *The Skyscraper: A Study in the Economic Height of Modern Office Buildings* (New York: American Institute of Steel Construction, 1930). Clark

- was a vice-president of S. W. Straus, the mortgage bond firm that financed the development of many skyscrapers, including the Chrysler Building, and Kingston was a commercial architect with Sloan & Robertson. The authors chose a hypothetical example of a site near Grand Central Station to demonstrate that a seventy-five-story building yielded a greater return on investment than smaller structures, thus arguing for skyscrapers as the most economically efficient use of urban land in districts with high property values. The best efforts to critique Clark and Kingston's skyscraper arguments were by George Ford, *Building Height*, and Thomas Adams, "Character, Bulk, and Surroundings of Buildings." For further debate, see Chamber of Commerce of the United States, *Economic Height of Buildings* (Washington, DC, 1927).
16. An excellent statement of the cyclical economic imperative behind New York's 1916 zoning is by Frank Lord, vice-president, Cross & Brown Company, Real Estate and Insurance, *Commission on Building Districts and Restrictions* (March 29, 1916), pp. 149–150. For a broad analysis of how economic timing affects planning and policy initiatives, see Marc A. Weiss, "The Politics of Real Estate Cycles," *Business and Economic History* 20 (1991): 127–135.
 17. Carol Willis, "Zoning and Zeitgeist: The Skyscraper City in the 1920s," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 45 (March 1986): 47–59, gives a good picture of the changes in architectural style and conceptions of urban design that followed the 1916 New York building height and bulk regulations. See also Robert A. M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, and Thomas Mellins, *New York 1930: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Two World Wars* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987); Paul Goldberger, *The Skyscraper* (New York: Knopf, 1981); Jonathan Barnett, *Urban Design*; Carol Herselle Krinsky, "Architecture in New York City," in Leonard Wallock, ed., *New York: Culture Capital of the World, 1940–1965* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988). On Boston's late 1920s conversion, see Holleran and Fogelson, "'Sacred Skyline.'"
 18. *New York Times* (November 22, 1916): 1:12; (November 5, 1916): 3:4; (May 6, 1917): 4:1.
 19. *New York Times* (February 25, 1917): 8:4; (August 5, 1917): 4:4; (February 2, 1919): 1:6.
 20. *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide* (June 1, 1918; hereafter *Record and Guide*): 697.
 21. *Record and Guide* (September 15, 1917): 329; (October 27, 1917): 531–532; (February 8, 1919): 171; (June 28, 1919): 861; (November 15, 1919): 493–494. *New York Times* (January 25, 1917): 1:13; (September 23, 1917): 8:2; (June 29, 1919): 9:18.
 22. *New York Times* (December 31, 1916): 3:5; (May 27, 1923): 9:2; (October 14, 1923): 10:1; (March 23, 1924): 11:2; *Record and Guide* (May 26, 1923): 655–656.
 23. *New York Times* (November 7, 1924): 1:1; (December 7, 1924): 11:1; (January 3, 1926): 10:4; (May 4, 1926): 1:16; (November 11, 1928): 13:1; (January 21, 1929): 1:1; (April 19, 1929): 1:8; *Record and Guide* (April 27, 1926): 6.
 24. *Record and Guide* (February 21, 1920): 241; (September 25, 1920): 427.
 25. See Willis, "Zoning and Zeitgeist" and *Record and Guide* (June 1, 1918): 697.

26. City of New York, Board of Estimate and Apportionment, Building Zone Amendment, Amendments 44 (June 28, 1919): 70; (July 11, 1919): 264; (November 23, 1923): 309; (April 4, 1924): 378; (March 6, 1925): 421; (June 12, 1925): 611; (June 17, 1926): 718; (March 31, 1927): 787; (September 29, 1927): 803–805; (November 17, 1927): 853; (March 8, 1928): 903; (September 27, 1928); *New York Times* (September 29, 1928): 18.
27. *Record and Guide* (July 29, 1922): 134.
28. *New York Times* (June 17, 1926): 25; (November 10, 1926): 29; (December 5, 1926): 4:2; (May 22, 1927): 12:4; *Record and Guide* (May 14, 1927): 8.
29. *New York Times* (June 18, 1926): 15; (May 13, 1927): 29; (July 9, 1926): 33.
30. *New York Times* (December 12, 1926): 2:21; (January 10, 1926): 11:1.
31. *Record and Guide* (January 21, 1928): 6; *New York Times* (April 18, 1927): 39; (June 7, 1927): 12; (June 17, 1927): 41; (January 15, 1928): 11:2.
32. *New York Times* (June 13, 1931): 29; (November 8, 1931): 11:1; (October 26, 1927): 51; (January 15, 1928): 11:2; (February 21, 1928): 27; (September 30, 1928): 12:2; (May 5, 1929): 12:16; (May 22, 1930): 5; (March 24, 1930): 20; *Record and Guide* (October 27, 1928): 6.
33. *Report of the City Committee on Plan and Survey* (New York, 1928), pp. 51–52.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 8–9; *New York Times* (April 11, 1928): 1; (June 6, 1928): 1; *Record and Guide* (October 20, 1928): 6, 8.
35. *New York Times* (November 16, 1926): 1; (May 16, 1928): 26; (June 13, 1931): 29; (November 8, 1931): 11:1.
36. *Record and Guide* (October 20, 1928): 6, 8.
37. *Record and Guide* (July 12, 1924): 8; (June 20, 1925): 10; *New York Times* (May 1, 1927): 11:2; (June 19, 1927): 10:1; (January 15, 1928): 14. On NABOM, see note 15.
38. *New York Times* (July 4, 1926): 8:3.
39. *New York Times* (May 2, 1928): 24.
40. RSNYE, *Buildings*; Ford, *Building Height*; Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs, vol. 2, *The Building of the City* (New York: RPNYE, 1931).
41. RPNYE, *Building of the City*, p. 192.
42. Edward M. Bassett, "Control of Building Heights, Densities and Uses by Zoning," in RSNYE, *Buildings*, p. 367.
43. Clifford L. Weaver and Richard F. Babcock, *City Zoning: The Once and Future Frontier* (Chicago: Planners Press, 1979), p. 125; Jerold S. Kayden, *Incentive Zoning in New York City: A Cost-Benefit Analysis* (Cambridge: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 1978). See note 6 for additional references on the evolution of New York zoning since the 1940s.
44. For example, see Babcock and Larsen, *Special Districts*; Terry Jill Lassar, *Carrots and Sticks: New Zoning Downtown* (Washington, DC: Urban Land Institute, 1990); Mike E. Miles, Emil E. Malizia, Marc A. Weiss, Gayle L. Berens, and Ginger Travis, *Real Estate Development Principles and Process* (Washington, DC: Urban Land Institute, 1991).

The Regional Plan and the Transformation of the Industrial Metropolis

Robert Fishman

In ten weighty volumes of maps, surveys, statistics, detailed architectural drawings, and earnest prose, the Regional Plan of New York and its Environs (1929–1931) presented itself to the world as the sober product of practical economics, rigorous social science, and disciplined planning theory.¹ Funded by more than a million 1920s dollars from the Russell Sage Foundation, the plan remains the most thorough and ambitious single project in the history of American planning. Yet, at the heart of this massive effort was a vision of an ideal twentieth century metropolis that was as much an “urban utopia” as the contemporary plans of Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier.²

The future that the plan proposed for the New York region in the years from 1929 to 1965 was summed up in the word “recentralization.” In the 1960s as in the 1920s, Manhattan would remain the region’s vital center. Easily accessible by an upgraded and expanded mass transit system from even the remotest corners of the “environs,” Manhattan’s centrality as the nation’s financial, corporate, and cultural capital would be enhanced by purging the island of its slums, industrial sites, and other “inappropriate uses.” The ground thus gained would be used for art deco towers and luxury apartment blocks. Manhattan would be rebuilt as the world’s ultimate “downtown.”

At the same time, the planners were convinced that the New York region’s economic well-being rested ultimately on maintaining its status as the nation’s premier industrial region. As Thomas Adams, general director of the plan, expressed it:

The leading forces that create great cities have been seen to be their industries and means of communication. The efficiency of industry and of the transportation that ministers to it, lies at the root of prosperity in the city. All else is secondary from an economic point of view.³

In eight wonderfully detailed volumes of the *Regional Survey*, the planners studied specific industries and their needs. They concluded that the region’s industrial health could be sustained only by a massive and coordinated effort to improve the infrastructure in what was termed the “industrial zone,” that is, the outer boroughs and New Jersey within a twenty-mile radius of lower Manhattan.

In precisely those industrial/working-class areas that would in fact by 1965 become tragic loci of decay and deindustrialization, the plan called for massive investments in new rail and mass transit lines, highways, and shipping piers. The industrial zone would thus enjoy the most efficient and best-coordinated rail and shipping network in the world, a network specifically adapted to the needs of small manufacturers that the plan regarded as the key to the region’s prosperity. Manufacturing would be encouraged to relocate to the industrial zone from congested areas in Manhattan—in 1922, as the planners learned, more than 420,000 workers were still employed in factories located in Manhattan south of Fifty-ninth Street⁴—and in these new locations industry would be freed from Manhattan’s congestion while enjoying even better access to the region’s wealth of labor and markets. The plan thus envisioned the gentrification of Manhattan and the reindustrialization of the region as a single coordinated project.

Population in the twenty-two counties in three states, which the plan defined as “New York and its environs,” was predicted to double from 10 million people in 1929 to 21 million in 1965. (In fact the region’s population in 1965 was 17.4 million.) Nevertheless, sprawl would be discouraged by mass transit facilities that would keep not only workers’ housing but also most middle-class housing within the core and industrial zone. Beyond the twenty-mile radius of the industrial zone, land not previously developed was mostly reserved for agriculture, private estates, or recreational facilities. Even after population had exceeded 20 million, three-quarters of the region’s 5,500 square miles would be preserved as undeveloped farm or park land.⁵

The Regional Plan was the last embodiment of a specter that had been haunting American reformers since the 1890s: the progressive city. The plan’s most profound influence was its detailed embodiment of a metropolitan landscape where, in Walter Lippmann’s terminology,

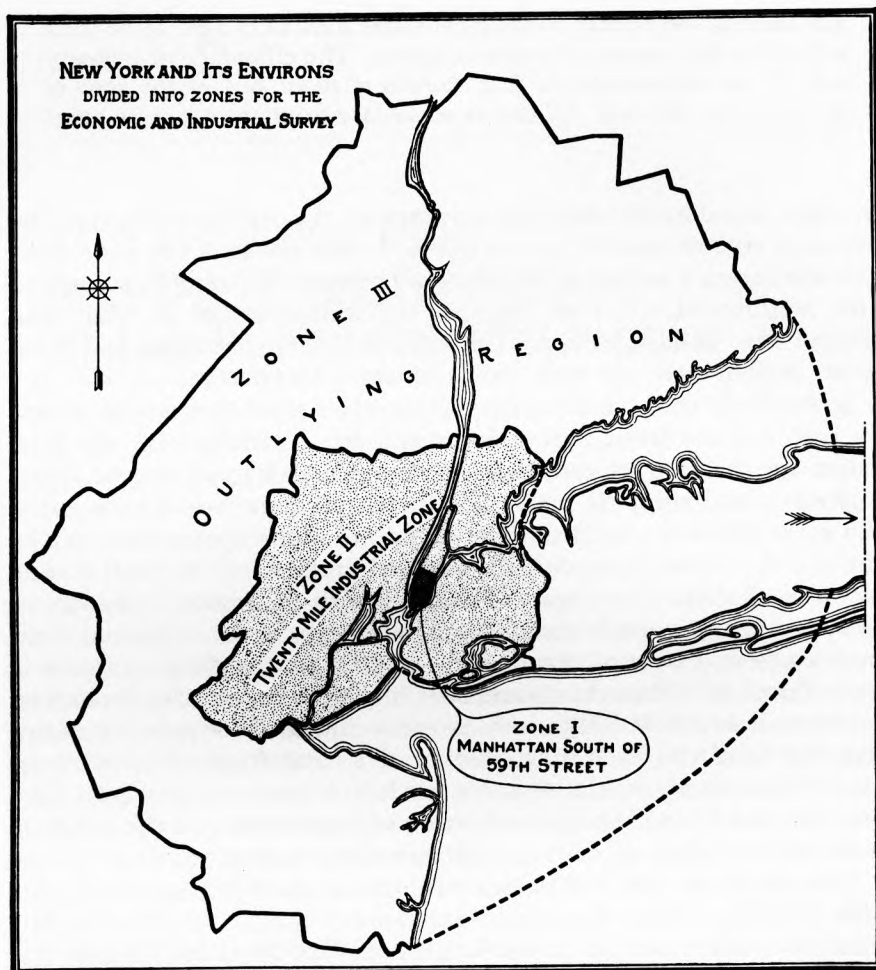


Figure 5.1 The Three Zones. Source: The Regional Survey. vol. 1, "Major Economic Factors."

"mastery" had replaced "drift." By uniting the region's technical, financial, and philanthropic elite around a set of detailed proposals, the plan would constitute the equivalent of a regional government. The plan was thus addressed to those who had taken up Lippmann's challenge to transcend localism and to devise "administrative methods whereby the great resources of the country can be operated by some thought-out plan."⁶

Indeed, so many of the plan's proposals were later built by Robert Moses or by the Port Authority that some scholars have suggested that

these titans were in fact merely carrying out the plan's purposes. In this view the plan and its backers constituted New York's original "growth coalition" that has guided the region's development since the 1920s.⁷ This interpretation, however, overlooks the fundamental divergence between the plan's overall program for the region (especially its careful balance between rail and auto transportation) and the aims of those who selectively adopted some of its recommendations in a very different context.

For example, the Regional Plan Association (the successor group to the Committee on the Regional Plan) has recently taken credit for its 1920s advocacy of a Narrows crossing between Staten Island and Brooklyn, a crossing that was finally achieved in 1964 by Robert Moses' Triborough Bridge Authority and the Port Authority as the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. But the plan's original proposal was for a freight-rail subway tunnel that would be a key link in an ambitious program to revitalize both rail and mass transit in the region.⁸ The Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, when built, served automobile and truck traffic only, and facilities for a subway link were carefully and consciously excluded.⁹

This points to a fundamental paradox in the plan's influence. The "landscape of modernity" that the plan proposed was still organized around a vision of a tightly centralized industrial metropolis based on rail transportation. Nevertheless, the specific proposals that were actually implemented were almost all highway projects, usually magnified in scale and purged of their rail and mass transit components. This selective implementation promoted an automobile-based suburbanization, and helped to create the conditions for the neglect and abandonment of the "industrial zone."

In the 1920s, the plan had indeed united a remarkably broad coalition of business leaders, politicians, and philanthropists around a detailed program for New York's future as a rail-based centralized industrial metropolis. Such people are usually regarded as powerful. Why then did the region develop along quite different lines, and what does this tell us about the real forces that created New York's "landscape of modernity"?

Like every vision that looks to the future, the Regional Plan had its roots firmly planted in the conditions and concerns of the recent past. It can trace its lineage back directly to the *locus classicus* of progressive city planning: Daniel H. Burnham and his protégé Edward H. Bennett's "Plan of Chicago" (1909).¹⁰ Charles Dyer Norton, the inspiration and driving force behind the New York plan, had begun his business career in Chicago. As president first of the Merchant's Club and then the Commercial Club of Chicago, he had been instrumental

in persuading Burnham to undertake the project and had also been invaluable in raising money to finance it through contributions from the city's business elite. Although the New York plan eventually "out-Burnhamed Burnham" in its scale and ambition, the Chicago plan set the ideological parameters within which the New Yorkers later functioned.¹¹

Burnham understood that the modern centralized city required massive coordination to achieve an efficient infrastructure and to create the boulevards and the great urban monuments he believed a great metropolis required. With Haussmann's Paris as his inspiration, Burnham in effect posed the question: How to achieve a Haussmann-like control over the great city and its hinterland without a prefect of Chicago? And without an authoritarian state to back up the prefect?

Burnham's answer was to create, outside of all political or corporate frameworks, a comprehensive plan that would spell out all the necessary forms of coordination and investment for the region. This plan would then gain the general support of the urban business elite. Through them it would be publicized and praised in newspapers; its images would become familiar to citizens; it would even be taught in the schools. A general consensus, achieved outside the usual political channels, would mold the actions both of elected politicians and of corporate leaders. In this way the design would set the agenda for massive, harmonious rebuilding. The plan itself would be the substitute for the absent prefect. This, for Burnham, was "Democracy."¹²

Charles Dyer Norton brought Burnham's vision to New York when, after service in the Taft administration, Norton was called to Wall Street in 1911 to be vice-president (and later president) of the First National City Bank. In early 1914, reform Mayor John Purroy Mitchel appointed Norton a member of the "Advisory Committee on City Plan," formed to continue the work of the Heights of Buildings Commission, whose 1913 recommendations would result in the pioneering zoning resolution of 1916. The Heights of Buildings Commission had concluded that specific problems raised by influential business groups—most notably the Fifth Avenue merchants' complaints about the "invasion" of their elite shopping street by garment workers' lofts—could be solved only by citywide zoning districts and a citywide plan. Norton, in Burnham's spirit, came to see that even the best New York City zoning plan could not deal adequately with issues of population and industrial distribution that necessarily touched the whole region.¹³

As an outsider to the complex mosaic of New York politics, Norton turned instinctively to a Burnham-style regional plan that would tran-

scend all local political boundaries, address fundamental concerns of urban form, and set the agenda for reordering the world's largest and richest metropolitan region.

From City Hall a circle must be swung which will include the Atlantic Highlands and Princeton; the lovely Jersey Hills back of Morristown and Tuxedo; the incomparable Hudson as far as Newburgh; the Westchester lakes and ridges, to Bridgeport and beyond, and all of Long Island.¹⁴

He concluded, "Let some Daniel H. Burnham do for this immense community what Burnham did for Chicago and its environs. . . ."¹⁵ But, as Norton soon realized, the New York elite was far too fragmented for there to be an equivalent of the Commercial Club of Chicago, and the planning itself was already too professionalized for there to be the equivalent of a Daniel Burnham.¹⁶ Norton turned from business clubs to prestigious foundations as a source of funding, and began to assemble an authoritative team of experts to substitute for the authority of a charismatic individual. The Russell Sage Foundation, already known for underwriting the Pittsburgh social survey (1907) and for building the model community of Forest Hills Gardens in Queens (1911), agreed in 1921 to fund the project.¹⁷

After Norton died in 1923, his position as chairman was filled by his old Chicago colleague Frederic Delano, a consulting engineer, Federal Reserve Board commissioner, and former railway executive. A team of social scientists under the direction of Columbia economist Robert Haig was ready to begin an elaborate social and economic survey of the New York region on which the plan was to be based. Meanwhile, a distinguished group of planners, which included Harlan Bartholomew, Edward H. Bennett, George B. Ford, John Nolen, and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., was already formulating proposals for various parts of the region. Overall coordination was in the hands of Thomas Adams, once an enthusiastic disciple of Ebenezer Howard and the Garden City movement and now a bland proponent of "practical," business-oriented planning.¹⁸

The plan began from the same problem which had concerned the members of the "Advisory Committee on City Plan": how to free Manhattan from "inappropriate" industrial uses, while retaining for the region the vitality of Manhattan's industrial base. As the plan's economists soon realized, New York's prosperity depended not on large mass-production industries or on corporate or financial employers but on the multitude of small businesses who derived unique ad-

vantages from the very congestion of the region:

. . . the area is the paradise of the small manufacturer. The average number of employees per factory in the United States is 43, here it is a little over two-thirds of that number. In many lines of industry a small firm may conduct a national business without the owner traveling more than a few blocks in any direction. Supplies, related industries, financing, space in lofts or old buildings, labor at the door, styles or ideas, all in the very locality, and buyers who come regularly from all over the country at not distant hotels, all make it possible for the small fellow to exist.¹⁹

These small manufacturers, however, were forced to pay high rents for cramped space in congested streets in the older manufacturing districts or move to the outskirts where access to wholesale markets, transportation, and labor was slow and uncertain. Under these circumstances many manufacturers were tempted to leave the region entirely.

The Regional Plan's answer to this dilemma was termed, in one of Thomas Adams' characteristically woolly phrases, "diffused recentralization."²⁰ This meant a coordinated effort to "diffuse" manufacturing out of Manhattan and then to recentralize it in specially planned districts in Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and New Jersey. Although these districts would be miles rather than blocks away from Manhattan's wholesale markets, the rail links to Manhattan would be so efficient that little convenience would be lost. Moreover, the new districts would have room for expansion, and far better freight connections to national and world markets. With improved mass transit, employees from throughout the region could reach their jobs more quickly than before.

The key to this scheme was rail transportation. The plan was fortunate to find a visionary engineer whose ideas exactly met their needs. This was William J. Wilgus, best known as the engineer who created the city's masterpiece of railroad engineering, the Grand Central Terminal.²¹ Wilgus possessed not only the progressive zeal for order and efficiency, but also a superb technical understanding of how a coordinated system of electrically driven rail transportation could unify a vast centralized region. The same imagination he applied to creating the intricate multilayered structure of Grand Central he now applied on a regional scale. If the plan represents an alternative future for New York, then William Wilgus was surely its alternative Robert Moses.

As early as 1908 Wilgus had begun to concern himself with the rationalizing of the region's freight network. The great port which had

given birth to the city was now proving to be an even greater barrier to the region's communications. Almost all freight entering or leaving the region had to be unloaded at least once at chaotic docks, put aboard car ferries or lighters, floated across the congested waters of the harbor and then unloaded again at one of the terminals of the twelve trunk-line railroads that served the region. The terminals on the New Jersey side of the Hudson were a nightmare of chaos, congestion, and delay; those on the Manhattan side were worse. During World War I, the system virtually collapsed, crippling the whole American war effort.

The particular genius of Wilgus' plan was to transform a seemingly intractable situation into so logical and well-organized a transportation system that it not only solved the problems of freight congestion but also gave tremendous advantages to manufacturing within the region. Wilgus proposed two concentric rail beltways around the region. An "Outer Belt Line" would cut congestion by enabling freight bound for outside the region to bypass the core; a complex "Inner Belt Line" requiring new bridges and tunnels would carry rail freight efficiently around the heart of the region without the need for cross-harbor flotations. The inner loop, moreover, would be operated cooperatively by all the railroads that would direct freight along the most cost-effective routes, not the ones that gave them the maximum profit. As a good progressive, Wilgus believed that a more efficient and rational system would serve the best interests of both the railroads and the region as a whole.²²

In the Regional Plan the "industrial zone" is defined by the inner belt line, especially by those areas where rail transportation could be coordinated with piers for ocean-going shipping. The zone includes both manufacturing sites and separate-but-adjacent residential districts, because the planners assumed that most working-class and lower-middle-class families would continue to live in relatively high densities close to their work. The plan envisioned small manufacturers clustering in the Bronx, Queens, and Brooklyn. Large-scale industry would favor New Jersey with its more direct access to the rest of the country. The plan proposed a grandiose "industrial city" for the Hackensack Meadowlands which would combine expansive sites for large plants with all the advantages of a site only five miles from midtown Manhattan.²³

Wilgus, moreover, did not neglect rapid transit for people. Once again he cut through the welter of competing private companies and public authorities by advocating a single public authority to operate all rapid transit in the region. Operations would be financed not only by fares but also by property taxes and general tax revenues. Commuter trains and subways would share the new facilities of the inner

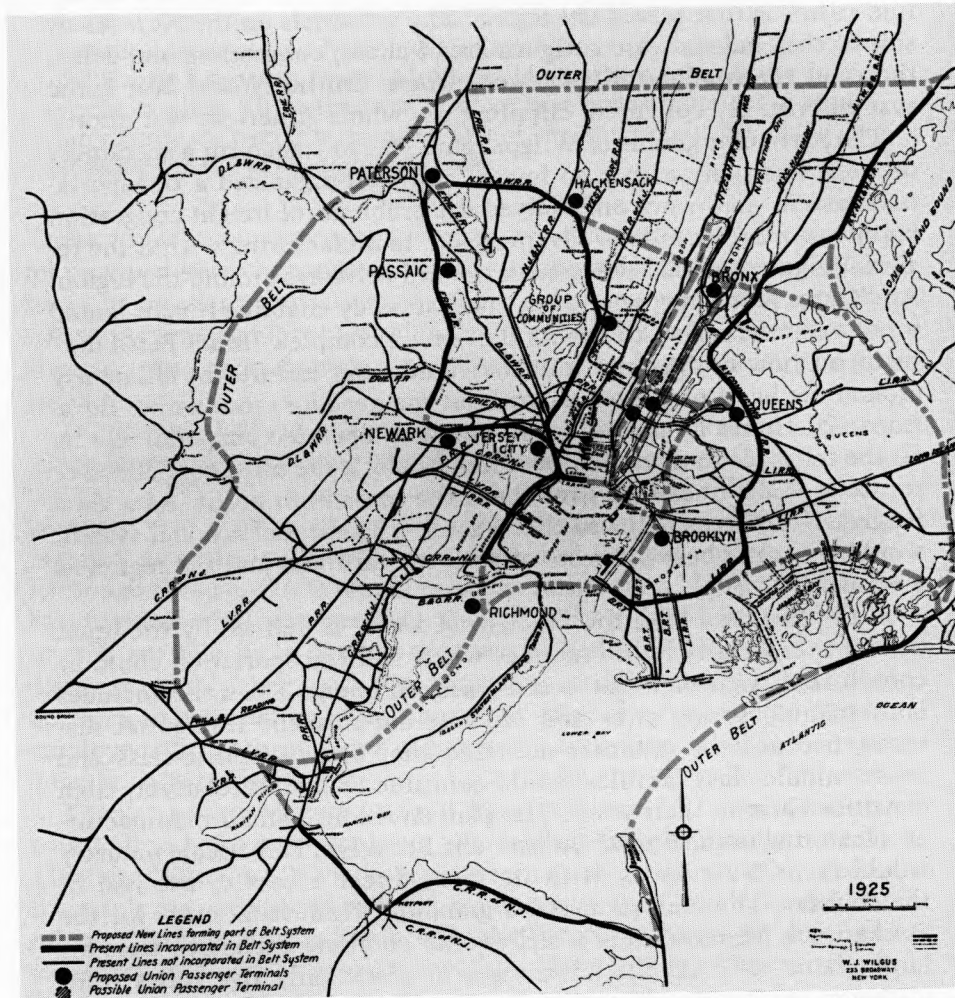


Figure 5.2 The Wilgus Plan for Rail Beltways. Source: *The Regional Survey*, vol. 4, "Transit and Transportation."

and outer belts, and new branch lines would be built to handle the region's expanding population. The system would not only bring workers to their jobs in the industrial zone but would also vastly improve service into Manhattan.

Such improvements would be vitally necessary, for the plan foresaw Manhattan not only retaining but augmenting as well its cultural and commercial dominance over the rest of the region. The plan was conceived when Manhattan was at its peak as the office, shopping, entertainment, and even manufacturing center for the region. A survey taken in 1924 found that 2.2 million people entered Manhattan on a typical business day—23 percent of the population of the whole region. When, on such a typical day, one combined those residing in Manhattan south of Fifty-ninth Street with those who worked or visited there, the total came to 2.9 million people, or 30 percent of the region's total population.²⁴ These staggering numbers included points of especially intense congestion, such as the 175,000 people who worked in the garment center,²⁵ or the 44 legitimate theaters with 56,000 seats located within a 1,000-foot radius of the corner of Broadway and Forty-second Street.²⁶

Far from challenging this degree of concentration, the plan argued that such numbers would at least double by 1965 as the population of the region doubled. They believed that office and other service employment would more than compensate for lost manufacturing jobs, and they tried to ensure that Manhattan would maintain its supremacy as the retailing and entertainment center for the region. By 1965, they predicted, 4.5 million people would enter Manhattan each business day and 7 million residents, commuters, and visitors would be found each workday between the Battery and Fifty-ninth Street.²⁷

Wilgus' mass transit system was specifically designed to handle such unprecedented crowds. Commuter trains or subways would travel on all the new links of the inner and outer belt lines as well as on many other new branch lines. For example, the rail tunnel from Hoboken to Fifty-ninth Street in Manhattan would also carry commuters to a new passenger terminal on Fifty-ninth Street. Within Manhattan, the elevated lines would be replaced by new subway lines, and these lines would carry not only subway traffic but also suburban trains to deliver commuters as close as possible to their destinations.²⁸

To save Manhattan from self-suffocation, the planners argued that skyscrapers should not be allowed to cluster together as they had in the financial district or midtown, but must be spaced out at regular intervals to prevent crowds from overwhelming the facilities at any given point. More imaginatively, they proposed to separate pedestrians

and shops from street traffic by a network of second-story arcades—skyways, in current terminology. While pedestrians moved unimpeded above, crosstown streets would tunnel under north-south avenues, permitting a continuous traffic flow. Taxis or trucks wishing to unload would pull into parking areas under the arcades, allowing traffic to flow unimpeded.²⁹ Meanwhile, as the garment lofts, the kosher slaughter houses, and other “inappropriate” uses left the island to be replaced by financial and corporate services, Manhattan would emerge as the world’s ultimate downtown, a region of modern office towers and luxury apartments for the elite, and a mecca of shopping and entertainment to draw the masses from around the region.

In contrast to these massive development plans for both the core and the inner industrial zone, the planners were most concerned in the outer zone to maintain the quiet and open space that was already there. The plan was deeply hostile to any “mass suburbanization” that might have lured the working and lower middle classes from their “natural” position in the industrial zone. The plan’s section on housing is filled with accounts of failed “premature” subdivisions that attempted that strategy. The planners were especially concerned about subdivisions that “invaded” territory they had reserved for upper-class estates. Thomas Adams distinguished sharply between “the erection of houses for well-to-do people on plots of an acre or more”—this he regarded as “a most desirable form of development”—and “the subdivision of country estates into small lots for the erection of small houses. . . .” The latter was “unwholesome and uneconomic” because it led to “wasteful and disorderly spreading of houses, [which] is one of the primary causes of the worst evils of city growth.”³⁰ Thus, each of the three zones in the plan would retain its distinct identity: the still rural quiet of the outer zone; the productive bustle of the inner industrial zone; and, in the core, a sleek art deco wonderland.

We must now resist the temptation to linger further on the details of the plan and attempt instead to deal with its fate—that is, with the powers that really determined the future of the region. Although the plan certainly called for large expenditures, one cannot doubt its practicality on those grounds alone. By 1965 the region had expended far greater sums on other goals. Nor could the planners be accused of harboring impractical social goals. Indeed, they were so close to the views of business leaders that Lewis Mumford could charge that the plan was

conceived first of all in terms which would meet the interests and prejudices of the existing financial rulers: indeed . . . its aim, from the beginning, was as much human welfare and amenity as could be



Figure 5.3 The Sleek Art Deco Wonderland: The Proposed Chrystie-Forsyth Parkway for a Rebuilt Lower East Side. *Source:* Regional Plan, vol. 2, “Building the City.”

obtained without altering any of the political and business institutions which have made the city precisely what it is.³¹

Mumford was certainly right that the makers of the plan were more than willing to allow an elite consensus to substitute for democratic decision making. But he and the makers of the Regional Plan were both mistaken to believe that any such consensus existed. Ironically, the crucial opposition to the plan would come not from parochial political bosses or "the masses" but from among the "financial rulers" who refused to play their part in the civic harmony the plan proposed. As we shall see, the railroads had perhaps the most to gain in the long run from implementation of the plan, yet they used their veto powers to block its progress. At the same time, other "financial rulers" deeply involved in suburban land speculation and home financing sought to profit from developments that profoundly altered "the political and business institutions which have made the city precisely what it is."

The plan's reception revealed the limitations of "the Burnham Method" for controlling regional development, and with it the weaknesses in progressive thought of the late 1920s. Its proponents saw so clearly the vital need for order and coordination, but their reliance on elite consensus and the authority of social science left them with no real power to discipline those organizations who through greed or inertia were "out of control." There is an element of pathos in Wilgus' declaration that

In some way the diverse elements in our midst, comprising as they do twelve trunk lines, three major and several minor traction systems, a variety of trucking interests, many water carriers, four hundred organized communities, three states and the nation, must be brought into harmony for the common purpose. Self-preservation demands it.³²

The inability of the Regional Plan to pursue "the common purpose" was mirrored at the national level where Herbert Hoover's hopes to harmonize the national economy through the voluntary actions of trade associations would lead to a far worse case of disorder. The future lay with those more willing and able to grasp directly the levers of state power.³³

The real test of the Regional Plan came in the attempts to implement the restructuring of the rail network. Not only was this restructuring a necessity if recentralization were to succeed, but success would provide a vital example of regional cooperation. Despite the difficulty of the task, the planners were in a strong position because

their efforts were being advanced by an agency that not only shared the plan's progressive agenda but also possessed real governmental powers, the Port of New York Authority.³⁴ Unfortunately, a plan for railroad reorganization required the cooperation of the region's railroads. The twelve trunk-line railroads achieved a rare level of agreement through their concerted refusal to cooperate with the Port Authority. Their opposition effectively vetoed not only the inner loop but also the whole revitalization of transportation for the inner zone that Wilgus and the Regional Plan sought. As Wilgus had feared, the habits of competition through exclusive use of terminal facilities outweighed for the railroads all the benefits of a rational plan.³⁵

Unable to overcome the railroads' opposition, the Port Authority in the mid-1920s made a crucial decision to abandon its initial rail orientation and to concentrate on providing bridges and tunnels for automobiles. The Port Authority's projects, moreover, were only one part of an uncoordinated but ultimately revolutionary program of road and bridge building undertaken by the highway departments of the three states and by other special authorities, most notably Robert Moses' Triborough Bridge Authority. The result was a massive tilt toward the automobile and the truck in the regional transportation system.

Ironically, one source for major highway projects was the Regional Plan itself, which had undertaken as part of its work to identify major traffic bottlenecks and to compile proposals for new roads for the region. Perhaps most importantly, the plan through its "Graphic Survey" maps propagated the ideal of a coordinated, comprehensive regional highway network. Nevertheless, this highway network was always intended to be subordinate to a centralized rail system that would continue to define the region. The plan's highway emphasis fell on creating a "metropolitan loop highway" that would for most of its length run adjacent to Wilgus' rail loop, a telling indication that the planners still saw highways as subordinate to rails. Many roads later built as superhighways appear on the plan's maps as boulevards or as joint highway/rail facilities. For example, the plan advocated the 178th Street (George Washington) Bridge both as a highway connection and—on a separate rail deck—as a link in the inner rail belt to carry both passengers and freight.³⁶

The authors of the plan saw only dimly the impetus that the automobile would give toward decentralization. We can now perceive clearly that whereas rail systems favor locations close to the regional hub where rail lines converge—that is, the plan's industrial zone—highways turn previously inconvenient areas in the "outlying region" into better sites than the congested core. As the case of New York illustrates, this fateful shift from rail to highway was not a case of

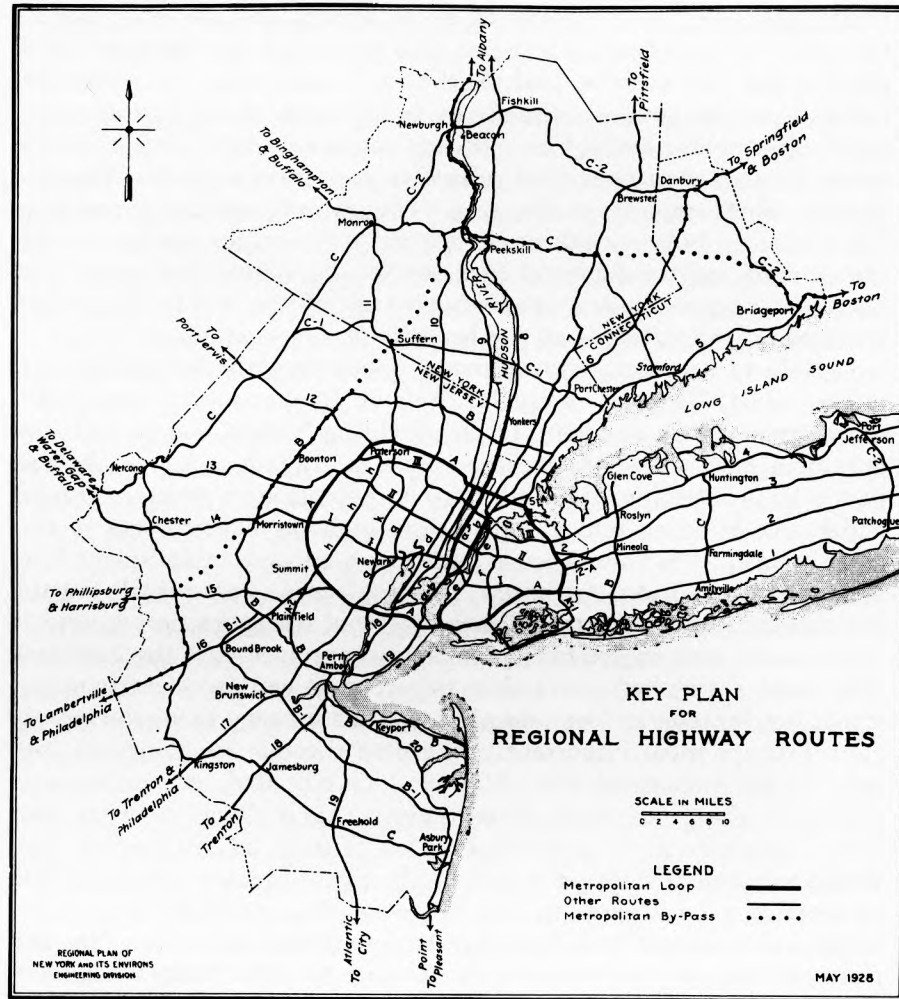


Figure 5.4 Proposal for Regional Highway Routes. Source: The Regional Plan, vol. 1, "The Graphic Regional Plan."

an outmoded technology being replaced by a more efficient, modern technology. Wilgus' plan demonstrates that rail technology had potential at least as great as the innovations that created the superhighways.

The great strength of the highway system was that where the rail system was controlled by private corporations whose structure and ethos were inherited from the nineteenth century, roads were constructed under newly organized public or quasi-public authorities. The former could draw directly on the public purse; the latter could act

entrepreneurially to combine public funds with private loans. Under a buccaneer like Robert Moses or a powerful bureaucracy like the Port Authority, the quasi-public agency secured virtual freedom from public control. Highway technology was thus pushed to its limits, while the possibilities for rail transportation remained unfulfilled.

The great weakness of the rail system was its bondage to increasingly sclerotic organizations that felt neither the necessity nor the promise of breaking ingrained patterns of competitive behavior to act cooperatively. They and the public mass transit agencies were incapable of the level of urbanistic thinking displayed in the Wilgus plan. Ironically, the harmony that Wilgus sought was finally found only in the "grave" of a universal bankruptcy that saw all of the region's freight railroads merged into Conrail in the 1970s. By then the inner industrial zone was in ruins. Thus, the railroads slowly strangled the centralized industrial metropolis as unconsciously as they had created it.

If the failure of the rail network was the Regional Plan's first great miscalculation, the second was surely the plan's belief that most residents would be content to live in high-density neighborhoods close to their work. The planners' class bias is evident here, but so is their misunderstanding of the economics of suburbanization. Despite their elaborate surveys, they completely failed to appreciate the depth and breadth of the appeal of the single family suburban house. More importantly, they failed to understand the powerful forces that had assembled to make this aspiration a reality.

The twenties, the decade of the Regional Plan, also saw a crucial shift in the resources of large financial institutions toward home mortgages. As industrial corporations began to finance their own operations through retained earnings, the banking system sought new customers for its funds among lot and home purchasers. The suburban developer functioned as a kind of middleman for the banks, arranging for mortgages for his customers which he immediately sold at a discount to large institutions. These mortgages were still the short-term balloon mortgages or high-interest second mortgages whose inadequacy led directly to disaster during the Great Depression. Nevertheless, the twenties opened that crucial pipeline between "the financial rulers" and the individual homebuyer that would fuel the suburban housing revolution.³⁷

The collapse of the homebuilding industry in the 1930s offered a brief, tantalizing hope that the future might match the Regional Plan. As Gail Radford has shown, housing reformers within the New Deal sought to direct capital away from suburban housing and the private mortgage market toward nonprofit or limited-profit corporations that

would build cooperative rental housing either in blighted areas within the cities or in New Towns safely beyond them.³⁸ Such a shift would have favored the goals of the Regional Plan; indeed, the plan published in 1933 a slim volume on *The Rebuilding of Blighted Areas* with detailed plans for extensive new construction throughout the industrial zone.³⁹ Despite these hopes, the New Deal followed its usual course of propping up and rationalizing the failed structures of the 1920s. The National Housing Act of 1934 set up the Federal Housing Administration and a network of savings-and-loan institutions that could draw mortgage money both from small savers and from large institutions. A far more reliable pipeline was now in place to advance the building of suburban homes and the decentralization of the urban population.⁴⁰

In this context, we can now appreciate the irony of the famous controversy in 1932 between Lewis Mumford and Thomas Adams over the Regional Plan. Mumford charged that Adams and the plan had sold out to real estate interests by advocating high population densities (and thus high land values) in the core and industrial zone. But Mumford shared Adams' concern to limit the spread of the metropolis and to maintain the open character of the outer zone. For Mumford (following Raymond Unwin and Adams' old mentor Ebenezer Howard) the solution was first to establish a greenbelt around the built-up areas of the metropolis to stop suburban sprawl, and then to decongest the urban areas by moving people and industry to compact New Towns in the outer zone. These New Towns, for which a prototype existed at Radburn, New Jersey, would be carefully planned and distributed to maintain the area's rural character. In fact, the industrial zone would indeed be decongested, but by a method Mumford opposed as vehemently as Adams: the tide of "spread city" suburbanization that would eventually engulf not only Radburn but so much of the outer zone.⁴¹

The shift from rail to highway and the revitalization of suburban housing thus each contradicted the basic assumptions of the Regional Plan. Moreover, the two functioned together as strongly interacting forces that together gave momentum to decentralization. Firms were pushed out of the old industrial zone by congestion and deteriorating rail service at the same time that they were drawn to the periphery by cheap land for expansion, by better roads for trucking, and by a work force now itself moving to the suburbs. As more jobs moved, the market for suburban housing was strengthened. The dream of a dense, efficient, prosperous industrial zone as the heart of a recentralized region was lost.

In 1942, the Regional Plan Association published a short report iron-

ically entitled *From Plan to Reality*.⁴² Despite the title, this and other reports showed that whereas the region's population had grown 26 percent since 1925, its built-up areas had increased 56 percent. Twelve million people in 1940 occupied almost as large an area as the plan had forecast for a population of twenty-one million in 1965.⁴³ Moreover, one could see trouble ahead in significant population declines not only for Manhattan but also for such prime industrial zone locations as Jersey City and Newark. David Johnson, the Regional Plan's most thorough and sympathetic historian, concludes that by 1941 the plan was obsolete.⁴⁴ One might go further and argue that by 1941 the centralized industrial metropolis was itself obsolete.

Notes

1. For bibliographical details of the *Regional Plan* and *Regional Survey*, see the general bibliography at the back of this volume.
2. For the context of the Regional Plan, see Peter Hall's comprehensive and definitive *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1988), and my *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).
3. *Regional Survey*, 6:131.
4. *Regional Survey*, 1:10.
5. *Regional Plan*, 1:317. For figures on the region's population, see David A. Johnson, *The Emergence of Metropolitan Regionalism: An Analysis of the Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs*. Ph.D. diss. (Graduate Field of City and Regional Planning, Cornell University, 1974), p. 236.
6. Walter Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest*, (orig. ed. 1914); new edition with introduction and notes by William E. Leuchtenburg (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1961), p. 85.
7. Michael Heiman, *The Quiet Evolution: Power, Planning and Profits in New York State* (New York: Praeger, 1988), and John H. Mollenkopf, *The Contested City* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 71-72.
8. For a discussion of the plan's proposal and the subsequent controversy, see Johnson, *Emergence of Metropolitan Regionalism*, pp. 396-419.
9. Michael N. Danielson and Jameson W. Doig, *New York: The Politics of Regional Development* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 200-204.
10. Thomas S. Hines, *Burnham of Chicago: Architect and Planner* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), Chapter 14.
11. For a profound account of planning theory from Burnham through 1945, see M. Christine Boyer, *Dreaming the Rational City: The Myth of American City Planning* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983).
12. Daniel H. Burnham, "A City of the Future Under a Democratic Govern-

- ment," *Transactions of the Town-Planning Conference, Royal Institute of British Architects* (October 1910): 369–378.
13. Johnson, *Emergence of Metropolitan Regionalism*, pp. 113–121; for background on New York zoning, see Chapter 2 by Keith Revell and Chapter 3 by Marc Weiss in this volume.
 14. Norton memorandum of November 27, 1915, quoted in Johnson, *Emergence of Metropolitan Regionalism*, p. 118.
 15. *Ibid.*
 16. For the fragmentation of the elite, see David C. Hammack, *Power and Society: Greater New York at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1982) and for the professionalization of planning, see Boyer, *Dreaming the Rational City*, Chapters 4 and 5.
 17. Johnson, *Emergence of Metropolitan Regionalism*, pp. 121–141.
 18. *Ibid.*, Chapter 5. For Adams, see Michael Simpson, *Thomas Adams and the Modern Planning Movement: Britain, Canada, and the United States, 1900–1940* (London: Mansell, 1985).
 19. *Regional Survey*, 4:188.
 20. *Regional Plan*, 1:150.
 21. For Wilgus, see especially Josef Konvitz, "William J. Wilgus and Engineering Projects to Improve the Port of New York," *Technology and Culture* 30 (1989): 398–425.
 22. *Regional Survey*, 4:171–175. The Wilgus plan is similar in outline to the one advanced in the 1920s by the Port Authority, despite sharp differences over particulars, such as the Narrows Tunnel between Brooklyn and Staten Island that Wilgus supported and which the Port Authority vetoed. More research is necessary to determine who is the true originator of the concept.
 23. *Regional Survey*, 4:150–157.
 24. *Regional Survey*, 4:36–39.
 25. *Regional Survey*, 1B:12.
 26. *Regional Survey*, 4:55.
 27. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
 28. *Ibid.*, pp. 168–169.
 29. *Regional Plan*, 2:413–416.
 30. *The Graphic Regional Plan*, pp. 387–388.
 31. Lewis Mumford, *New Republic* (1932), as reprinted in Carl Sussman, ed., *Planning the Fourth Migration: The Neglected Vision of the Regional Planning Association of America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976), p. 255.
 32. *Regional Survey*, 4:176.
 33. For Hoover, see Ellis W. Hawley, "Herbert Hoover, the Commerce Secretariat, and the Vision of an 'Associative State,'" *Journal of American History* 61 (1974): 116–140. By contrast, see Mollenkopf, *Contested City*, for an important account of the impact of those who knew how to use the power of the state on the cities.
 34. Jameson W. Doig has documented the Port Authority's role in the 1920s in Chapter 4 of this volume and in his "Entrepreneurship in Government: Historical Roots in the Progressive Era." Paper prepared for the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 1988.
 35. Erwin W. Bard, *The Port of New York Authority* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), Chapters 1–6. I thank Jameson Doig for permitting me to see the relevant chapters in his forthcoming definitive history

- of the Port Authority, *Empire on the Hudson*, that will tell the complete story of the Port Authority and its "railroad plan."
36. *Regional Plan*, 1:200.
 37. Leo Grebler et al., *Capital Formation in Residential Real Estate* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1956), Parts A and B.
 38. Gail Radford, "Modern Community Housing: New Responses to the Shelter Problem in the 1920s and 1930s." Ph.D. diss. (Department of History, Columbia University, 1989).
 39. Clarence Arthur Perry, *The Rebuilding of Blighted Areas* (New York: Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs, 1933).
 40. Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford, 1985), Chapter 11.
 41. Both Mumford's polemic and Adams' response are reprinted in Sussman, *Planning the Fourth Migration*. For Radburn, see Daniel Schaffer, *Garden Cities for America: The Radburn Experience* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982).
 42. Regional Plan Association, *From Plan to Reality: Three* (New York: Regional Plan Association, 1942).
 43. Forbes B. Hays, *Community Leadership: The Regional Plan Association of New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 88.
 44. Johnson, *Emergence of Metropolitan Regionalism*, p. 505.

Fiorello H. LaGuardia and the Challenge of Democratic Planning

Thomas Kessner

The Depression of the 1930s put an abrupt end to national dreams of permanent prosperity, confronting the United States with an economic catastrophe of surpassing proportions and throwing New York City into fiscal turmoil. At the same time, precisely because this was an emergency that the federal government could not ignore for long, the Depression initiated an era of federal involvement in relief, public works, and economic planning that made possible a wide-reaching transformation for the aging industrial metropolis.

Depression acquainted New Yorkers with bank failures, industrial meltdown, curbside apple sellers, bread lines (what Heywood Broun called the "worm that walks like a man"), and hopelessness. So deep was the gloom, the sense of worse times impending, that working people applied for assistance *in anticipation* of unemployment. "I wish there were war again," a jobless worker told Louis Adamic. And natives from the Cameroons sent a contribution of \$3.77 to feed "the starving" of New York.¹

With relief expenses soaring and tax collections plummeting, the city budget fell into deep arrears. Jimmy Walker's insouciant minimalist government had been enough in the twenties, when New Yorkers were satisfied with a stylish mayor who went about the business of serving Tammany faithfully. But bad times required leadership to help the growing number of needy, and to secure a shaky public order. In the face of fiscal disaster, a style of governing designed to "make good Democrats" was overmatched.

Mayor Jimmy Walker recognized as much, going hat in hand to the bankers, who allowed themselves to be persuaded to help the city stave off bankruptcy—for a good price. A humiliating “bankers’ agreement” ceded control over city finances to its creditors. The bankers dictated new taxes and secured a veto over spending; tax revenues were expressly committed to paying off loans before meeting any other obligations; and the city placed \$50 million in escrow in the event that tax revenues proved insufficient. The city would be able to pay back its loans; left unanswered, however, was how the city would be able to continue to operate.²

City governments are not reshaped in good times. When the free market provides jobs and basic services for the large majority, insurgent candidates find it hard to sell the electorate on reform. In 1929, Congressman Fiorello LaGuardia ran for mayor after a career as an outspoken critic of unregulated profit-motive economics and pinch-penny social policy. The incumbent Jimmy Walker defeated him by the largest margin in the city’s history. LaGuardia’s strident charges of corruption and insistence on reform threatened to make a serious thing of government. In 1929, New Yorkers still preferred Beau James and unregulated good times.³

New York’s 322 square miles represented perhaps the most densely packed and complexly divided cityscape in the world. Commerce, industry, and a surging residential population competed for limited space. Growing in a relentlessly uncharted fashion, the city’s business districts projected a titanic quality. The 56-story Chanin Building and the 77-story Chrysler, both completed in 1929, prepared the midtown skyline for the 102-story Empire State Building. While these soaring masterpieces, built upon private initiative, had profoundly public effects, their developers were assigned no larger responsibility for the congestion and safety problems that they brought on than meeting minimal zoning requirements.

Unlimited skyscraper construction was just one symbol of New York’s unguided growth, of a metropolis lacking the municipal will and public intelligence to shape its own evolution. Here was a world-class city where no mayor or public official conceived of a master plan or even thought in such terms. Lineaments for future growth were instead proposed by the privately organized Regional Plan Association of New York (RPA) and paid for by the Russell Sage Foundation.⁴

Throughout the 1920s, this group carried out a study of the New York metropolitan region, publishing its agenda for growth and orchestrated development in a ten-volume “Plan for the New York Region and Its Environs.” This pioneering document outlined a comprehen-

sive policy to protect harbors, zone industrial use, and organize regional transportation and recreational space with some concern for civic beauty and aesthetic grace. Published between 1929 and 1931, the plan was presented to the public at a time when the city was perched on the edge of fiscal collapse. The comprehensive reconstruction of its infrastructure seemed like the last thing that it could undertake amidst the immediate crisis of unemployment and widespread immiserization. In addition to money, the task demanded creativity, imagination, and a large conception of public responsibility; and all New York had was Jimmy Walker and his band of bossed aldermen.

Beset by economic crisis and political paralysis, New Yorkers were further stunned by the Seabury investigations, which disclosed how extensively the bosses had corrupted the city. The genial practitioners of honest graft had focused their limited political intelligence and imagination on “seein’ my opportunities and takin’ ’em,” on sacking the municipality they had been pledged to serve. Little wonder that they had failed to develop a government appropriate to New York’s size and complexity. Jimmy Walker’s New York was not merely corrupt, it lacked the freshness and vision with which to meet the challenge of modern times.⁵

The Seabury inquiries forced Walker from office on September 1, 1932, and the following year Fiorello LaGuardia, who had been retired from Congress in the New Deal landslide in 1932, was elected as New York’s ninety-ninth mayor on a Fusion ticket. Written history has often overplayed the impact of individuals on large forces. Yet, it is difficult to write the history of modern New York without paying proper attention to the role of Fiorello LaGuardia. Before LaGuardia, the city was run by mayors who conceived of their jobs in the narrowest terms possible. They played politics with relief, ran a corrupt and wasteful municipal shop, and, even in these days of generous federal grants, were frozen out of competition for Washington’s dollars. There was just no assurance that they would make honest and efficient use of the funds.⁶

Jimmy Walker and his successors Joe McKee and John O’Brien saw the Depression as calamity; LaGuardia saw it as an opportunity for himself and for the municipality that he aimed to serve. For all the money and thinking that went into the RPA’s plans and for all the effect that the Port Authority had, it was LaGuardia and his three administrations that remade New York in its modern image. Max Weber wrote that the art of politics is the “knowledge of influencing men . . . of holding in one’s hands a nerve fiber of historically important events.” The larger structural forces prepared New York for its

modern era, but it was LaGuardia who lifted the city's politics to new levels of possibility by marshaling the political will and intelligence to confront the critical public issues of the time.⁷

LaGuardia broke with the past to lay out a new agenda. He brought into office five goals: (1) restore the city's fiscal health and win back its political independence from the bankers' consortium; (2) develop a policy of humane and financially prudent relief; (3) clean out corruption; (4) establish a merit-based civil service; and (5) rebuild New York into a modern, aesthetically pleasing, efficiently laid out city. The key to achieving his plans lay in a new relationship with Washington.

The crash, LaGuardia told Congress a few weeks after taking over City Hall, had put "every municipality to the wall," and the states were not able to be of much help. What Fiorello meant to do, New York City Chamberlain Adolf A. Berle, Jr., wrote to his friend President Franklin Roosevelt, "is to navigate New York City into a friendly cooperative basis with both the state and National Administrations."⁸

Historically, cities had been viewed as wards of their states, and it was to the states that they turned for assistance. Mayors negotiated with governors and aldermen, not with presidents and cabinet secretaries. But LaGuardia aimed to involve Washington. He had worked with the New Deal as a member of the House of Representatives, and public works chief Harold Ickes welcomed his election. "His career in Congress," Ickes wrote about LaGuardia, "shows that he has real ability and high courage. . . . He ought to give New York a great administration." Nonetheless, when the mayor-elect first came to Washington to discuss federal assistance for his strapped municipality, Ickes sent him home with a blunt message: "Go home and balance your budget, your credit is no good."⁹

Within its first one hundred days the new Fusion government pushed through an Economy Bill that trimmed the budget and pared down the municipal work force. As a congressman, LaGuardia had attacked Herbert Hoover for proposing a federal sales tax and had led the fight to defeat the regressive excise. But now he saw things differently. Relief costs had to be placed on a pay-as-you-go basis, or they would jeopardize the budget with huge and unpredictable debt, making it impossible to secure loans or grants. So LaGuardia took Ickes' admonition to heart and signed into law a 2 percent sales tax.

He also put the other elements of the Fusion agenda into place, establishing a humane relief policy, launching a wide-ranging attack on corruption, and expanding the merit basis of the civil service. This done, he turned to his ambitious program for the federally assisted reconstruction of New York.

LaGuardia assembled groups of engineers, architects, and other experts and put them to work planning new projects. "I want help from

the people who know something," he told the pleased professionals, "rather than from the politicians." Even before he was sworn into office, LaGuardia presented Washington with a laundry list of proposals for subways, bridges, airports, slum clearance, street repair, and public housing. Each project was carefully detailed with a firm price tag and a prudent projection for the use of relief labor. And each promised to leave a public monument to the New Deal upon its completion.¹⁰

At LaGuardia's suggestion, relief czar Harry Hopkins appointed Wall Street attorney Travis Harvard Whitney as New York's Civil Works administrator. Whitney called newspaper columnist Heywood Broun one day soon after taking office to ask for a list of laid-off reporters he could put to work. Broun came by Whitney's office that day, but said it would take some time to compile the names. "That won't do at all," rebuked Whitney. "You don't understand. This is a rush job, every day counts." Within weeks tens of thousands of the unemployed were put to work. After less than a month the fifty-eight-year-old Whitney collapsed at his desk and died. "Killed in action," wrote an admiring Heywood Broun.¹¹

In Chicago, Detroit, and San Francisco, federal money went into useless boondoggles or to buy votes. So completely did Massachusetts State Treasurer Charles Hurley control Civil Works Administration appointments that the press referred to CWA as Charlie's Workers Administration. Little wonder that Hopkins and Ickes took LaGuardia seriously. His way of governing was different from the regular crowd. Within weeks of his election, LaGuardia brought home an allotment of 200,000 federally funded jobs, 20 percent of the entire CWA program. The new administration initiated 4,000 separate projects, ranging from the construction of covered municipal markets and refurbishing of city parks to developing shelters for the homeless and clearing slums. Just a few weeks into Fusion, national studies described LaGuardia's management of federal projects as the most honest and effective in the country, and a state report concluded that "New York City is remarkably free from political control or influence."¹²

Historian Bernard Fay had remarked in the twenties that New York was the only city wealthy enough to rebuild itself every ten years. It was no longer rich enough, but LaGuardia envisioned a program of new bridges, airports, public housing projects, health stations, hospitals, and beaches that would enhance the quality of city life and provide hundreds of thousands of jobs. It was the thirties, tough times, when most mayors were begging to get a school or a bridge, and he insisted that he wanted to make urban life into a "great living adven-

ture, with playgrounds, parks, museums, libraries, and parkways," to match the grand aesthetic spirit of the European cities he had known as a youth.¹³

"You know," LaGuardia once mused to Paul Kern, "I am in the position of an artist or a sculptor. . . . I can see New York as it should be and as it can be, but now I am in the position of a man who has a conception that he wishes to carve or paint, who . . . hasn't a chisel or a brush." It was to Washington that he turned for the chisels and brushes, and it was to the globally renowned developer Robert Moses that he assigned the primary responsibility for putting these chisels and brushes to creative public use.¹⁴

To get the stormy forty-five-year-old president of the Long Island State Parks Commission to accept the appointment, LaGuardia consolidated the five separate borough parks departments and placed them under Moses' control; he also threw in the chairmanship of the Triborough Bridge Authority. Once in office, Moses corralled the best engineers and architects and rammed his projects to successful completion. A hard-bitten taskmaster who ridiculed do-gooders, Moses had the charmed gift of spinning the gossamer of exalted higher purpose over his undertakings. In less than a year, he poured 26 million federal dollars into the city's parks and increased their number by a third.¹⁵

Years before, during the twenties, New York City had created an authority to negotiate a loan and build a colossal complex of four bridges linking together Manhattan, the Bronx, and Queens, as well as two East River islands. Tammany characteristically converted this \$50 million Triborough project into a patronage trough for designing politicians, leading the federal government to shut off funding. With LaGuardia's new standing in Washington, the credit tap was reopened. Moses streamlined the plans, added approach roads, parkways, the East River Drive, vast recreation areas on Ward's and Randall's islands, and converted the Triborough project into New York's brood mare of public works.

Then, less than two months into the new administration, suddenly the federal money stopped coming, and it was put to LaGuardia that he would have to choose between his master builder and the president who held the chisels. Years before, Moses had made an enemy of Franklin Roosevelt, and now the president made it clear to a shaken LaGuardia that no more money would be available for the Triborough or other major projects unless he got rid of his commissioner.

Moses was an extremely gifted builder, but he came to represent more than that. If LaGuardia was to succeed in his ambitious plans for the city, he needed Washington. But he also needed to state the basis of the relationship, to keep the city's independence and its right

to manage its own programs and policies. Over the next months, as LaGuardia painstakingly developed a scheme that satisfied Roosevelt while saving Moses' position, the mayor was able to achieve two things: He gained the personal trust and respect of the president, and he won a measure of control over his autocratic parks commissioner.¹⁶

LaGuardia understood one fundamental point with regard to cities: The time of the self-sufficient, wholly independent city had passed. New York could not pay for relief, social services, and new parks and bridges. The money had to come from the well-financed federal experiments in pump priming and social welfare assistance, and LaGuardia managed to make his city into the New Deal's favorite laboratory for urban and social initiatives. "He has a confidential relationship with President Roosevelt enjoyed by no Democrat," reported the *Albany Times Union*. "The doors of the White House open at his radiant approach, and the President is never too busy to sit down and have a chat with him." Roosevelt himself said of his foxy friend: "Our Mayor is the most appealing man I know. He comes to Washington and tells me a sad story. The tears run down my cheeks and tears run down his cheeks and the first thing I know he has wangled another \$50 million." The CWA, WPA, and PWA alone spent more than \$1.1 billion in New York during Fusion's first five years.¹⁷

None of the thousands of federal projects promised to have a broader effect than the movement to clear the slums and replace them with subsidized housing. To say today that New York was a pioneer in public housing recalls little of the boldness that went into this effort in the thirties. But in those days, the battle to clear the slums seemed to offer promise, not only for improving the terrible situation in these poor neighborhoods, but also to battle the crime, disease, and defeat that it produced. For a brief moment in the thirties, then, housing represented a different dream. Slum clearance and public housing would work a reform not only on the cityscape but also on its inhabitants, reinforcing sobriety, thrift, cleanliness, and civic virtue. It would reduce crime, uplift the poor, and provide jobs.

Not in that order.

Perhaps public housing deserved to be treated as a reform in its own right, but Depression politics dictated that the only lever for large-scale federal funds was the promise of creating jobs to put the unemployed to work. And so the housing program, like so many New Deal projects, developed backward out of a search for projects that would absorb federal money. The goal was jobs, not houses. For the moment this did not make much of a difference. First Houses, Williamsburg Houses, and Harlem Houses quickly went up, providing more than 1,200 working-class families with new accommodations, but there

were important long-range implications for basing a policy on the shifting sands of the federal relief program.¹⁸

With its initial projects underway, the New York City Housing Authority turned to a long-range plan for comprehensive urban renewal. NYCHA Chairman Langdon Post conceived a \$2 billion program for a "real new deal" in slum clearance and public housing. At the same time, LaGuardia commissioned Nathan Straus to study the European public housing experience and make recommendations for the city.¹⁹

Straus brought back from his travels a proposal for an even more far-reaching approach than Post's. He recommended that New York forget about rebuilding slum areas. The new projects would only be swallowed up by their loathsome surroundings. He advocated quarantining entire city sections, declaring the old housing unfit, bulldozing the rookeries, and replacing them with parks and playgrounds. To prevent the growth of other slums, he wanted strong zoning laws that would limit density and require adequate light, air, and space for all new construction. The plan called for panoramic planning and massive allocations, the cost to be shared by the city and the federal government.²⁰

LaGuardia received the report, praised Straus' unstinted efforts, and buried it. He could not pay for new housing, and Franklin Roosevelt had already indicated to Post his disinterest in a program that carried nine figures on the bottom line and a ten-year turnaround. Instead, LaGuardia allowed the housing reformers their enthusiasms, exploited their commitments, and picked their brains; but New York's housing program was limited to building what it could with the chisels and brushes that it got from Washington.²¹

Here was the single best chance for housing reform in American history, but even for a Fusion administration comprehensive reform was out of the question. Piecemeal was better than no meal at all, and the best that LaGuardia could do was take the hopeful plan for large-scale public housing and shrink it to the politically possible: a few housing developments and several thousand families in better surroundings than they had ever dreamed possible.

But so long as only a small portion of the virtuous poor (to be accepted, applicants were required to have jobs, some insurance, and at least a modest bank account) were rehoused, the premise of rehabilitating the socially unfit through sunshine and private toilets was never really tested. And with the pioneering public housing program conceived primarily as a means for providing work relief, the entire undertaking was placed on the unsteady foundation of anti-Depression largesse.

Langdon Post was unwilling to accept so shrunken a dream, and, by LaGuardia's second term, the disillusioned commissioner was clashing openly with PWA chief Ickes. LaGuardia, who quickly tired of reform commissioners defining their own agendas, accepted Post's resignation. When Post lamely pointed out that he had not submitted it and intended to stay in office until a successor was appointed, LaGuardia immediately swore in his press secretary. Easing himself away from the warm language of caring, dreaming, and hoping, LaGuardia was steering toward what was reasonable and could be sold to Washington. Housing, he said now, was too important to leave to the reformers; it had become a "big business proposition."²²

By 1938, Robert Moses understood just how big a business proposition even a limited housing program was going to be. As allocations for bridges and parkways were being cut, Moses aimed to make housing his new domain. First, he sought to prepare the ground by criticizing existing policy. Then, he began attacking the incumbent commissioner, sending him abusive letters about his stupidity and ignorance, while he peppered the mayor with memos and suggestions about housing policy.²³

Finally, Moses was ready. He had secretly put his own architects to work creating an ambitious plan for slum clearance and public housing. A select audience of housing reformers, builders, realtors, and friendly journalists were invited to the Museum of Natural History to hear an address on "housing and recreation" on November 22, 1938. What Moses had in mind for this talk was much more. He handed out lavishly illustrated brochures that detailed a \$245 million slum clearance and housing program.

The speech aimed to establish a comprehensive set of principles for a new housing program under Moses. The proposals were precise to the exact dimensions of the houses and their locations. It was a bold effort to overwhelm those present and the large radio audience that was expected to be listening to the talk over WNYC.

But no one listening to WNYC that night heard Moses. Someone had tipped off LaGuardia, and he pulled the plug on the broadcast. The next day, he explained that technical considerations had prompted WNYC to cancel coverage, but his message to his power-hungry parks commissioner could not be more clear. LaGuardia ridiculed Moses' housing plan as a beautiful printing job while privately instructing his Housing Committee to make sure that not one of Moses' ideas was adopted.²⁴

Early in his administration, LaGuardia had protected Moses from Roosevelt because he valued Moses' skills and considered him an important symbol of the city's independence. He also respected Moses'

rare gifts as a planner and builder, but LaGuardia had no intention of arming his power-hungry commissioner with any more planning authority than he already had. For, unlike Moses, LaGuardia had come to understand that he had to balance city growth with other municipal imperatives. He also came to appreciate the profoundly disturbing effect that Moses-type programs could have on city populations.

Moses' audacious plans and radical reconception of the city represented a strong city-planning ethos. He welcomed the idea of imposing his vision on vast slabs of urban territory, on assembling properties and converting them into magnificent parks and spanning the waters with world-class bridges in the name of larger public purpose. Ultimately, of course, modernization programs—whether for parks, bridges, or highways—in a city as tightly settled as New York means assigning choices between competing uses, between people and businesses, cars and trains, growth and shrinkage, the present and the future.

Moses viewed the cityscape as fluid, ever alterable, something for him to mold into an efficiently integrated whole. Once the experts agreed on the guiding principles, the rest was a question of raising the funds and engineering. He could understand that pressure groups, guided by their own blinkered interests, might try to obstruct modernization, but he had no sympathy for them. They must learn, he used to say, that you can't make omelets without cracking eggs, that you could not build a better city without disturbing established arrangements.

LaGuardia initially supported comprehensive planning as a way to harness expert architects and engineers to the exciting job of creating a better city, and reclaiming urban growth from the primitive chaos of laissez-faire thinking. The new 1938 charter, in the words of Wallace Sayre and Herbert Kaufman, charged the City Planning Commission "with the adventurous responsibility for introducing innovation and rationality into the political processes of a city long accustomed to opportunistic bargaining among vested political and economic interests of great strength." LaGuardia did not trust Moses with this much power over New York's planning process, passing over the mercurial commissioner to appoint New Deal brain truster Rexford Guy Tugwell as chairman of the City Planning Commission. Tugwell believed that the city should be steered toward long-term stability instead of growth. He called for interspersing generous green belts between residential areas to add beauty and a sense of human scale to the massive metropolis. With his commission, Tugwell spent more than a year and a half dividing the city into residential, manufacturing, and commercial sectors, and designing detailed land-use maps to guide

city growth into the next decade. But while the charter assigned the commission broad responsibilities (preparing a master plan, zoning regulations, a capital budget, and a five-year capital program), it granted no authority to implement these plans.²⁵

Like all plans that make choices between conflicting possibilities, between jobs and beauty, between clean air and efficiency, between sunlight and profits, between individual freedom and the "commonweal," Tugwell's work raised strong objections. Real estate and commercial interests pressed LaGuardia to modify the plan. Only a fully committed LaGuardia could clear the way for Tugwell, and because ultimately the ethic of the planner conflicts with the ethic of the democratic politician, LaGuardia was far from committed. Without LaGuardia's protection, Tugwell's plan was eviscerated.

Fed up with his impossible task and LaGuardia's fading support, Tugwell accepted a White House offer to serve as the appointed governor of Puerto Rico. *That* was the sort of power a planner needed. Eighteen months of finely detailed work and a strong planning point of view went with him. The new commission that replaced Tugwell's group limited itself to imposing restrictions on building heights and residential concentrations.²⁶

Planners and social critics may criticize Moses, Tugwell, or LaGuardia, but if they are to be taken seriously, they must answer this: How much control can a municipality cede to planners to fasten their own long-range vision upon the city outside the checking limits of democratic politics? LaGuardia flourished in the hothouse of the present, the push and pull of elective politics. He learned that planning, like much else in urban government, involves municipal priorities and is open to debate and political wrangling. Ultimately, LaGuardia was not prepared to assign this power to master builders or brilliant technicians.

Walter Lippmann once said that LaGuardia took the human sympathy that had been the abiding strength of Tammany and infused it into the tradition of good government. He upgraded New York into a more modern city, a more honest city, a more humane city, a city that got out from under the thumb of the state to develop its own relationship with Washington. By undertaking a comprehensive program of federally funded renovation, LaGuardia influenced the city's built environment in ways no other mayor had. He brought his city wonderful things—hundreds of parks, pools, and playgrounds, thousands of new public housing units, dozens of new medical facilities, world-class tunnels, bridges, and airports, and even a World's Fair—but they were products of a political moment, when the Depression and LaGuardia's relationship with FDR opened new, but limited, possibilities for coop-

eration between Washington and New York. Ultimately, however, these projects were designed in an atmosphere that focused on fighting an economic emergency, not on charting fundamentally new urban policy.²⁷

When World War II put an end to these projects, LaGuardia realized that the city was on a treadmill. It could not pay for maintaining its own infrastructure, much less plan its continued growth, without steady infusions of new federal funding. While the war was being won, LaGuardia readied detailed plans for a peacetime program of \$1.25 billion in federally funded public improvements for his city.

Again his plans were designed to meet an immediate need. It took him a long time to accept the idea that businesses were moving out of the city, that industry was declining, that growth could reach a strangulation point. His plans reflected none of this; they demonstrated instead the immediate needs of assuring jobs and houses and parks and police protection to the city's people. But the federal government was not prepared to spend as much in good times as it had spent during the Depression. And when the special era that had been cemented by an unusual personal relationship between the Fusion mayor and the New Deal president passed, the city was left with a style of expensive progressive government to which it had become accustomed, but which it would only now have to get used to supporting largely on its own.²⁸

When LaGuardia left office, Rexford Tugwell, who once described Fiorello as one of the few men of his generation of truly presidential mettle, was disappointed in the state of the city. The budget was unbalanced, the streets were dirty, and the schools were crowded. "The whole of the City's machinery," he wrote, "was breaking down from sheer lack of funds." In the end, planners and realists both had to contend with the problem of limits, of how much the citizens of the city, whose service ultimately legitimized the efforts, were willing to pay for better futures for themselves and their children.²⁹

Many of the other essays in this volume focus on structural change. Well into the third decade of the "new social history," it is not necessary to state the argument that plain people and large processes need to be factored into any serious historical equation. But there are times when the historical context is swiftly altered, opening up broad opportunities for individual salience. The Depression was such a time. It created opportunities for sweeping change both on the federal and local level. It took a Franklin Roosevelt to make a New Deal of the national opportunity, and it took a Fiorello LaGuardia to reshape New York.

Herbert Hoover and Jimmy Walker could not have done it. And once LaGuardia's second administration completed the initial agenda for progressive reform, even he could not sustain the level of transforming activity.

But between 1934 and 1939 with the hopes of the people focused on him, with his open access to Washington, with his ability to attract the best and the brightest to city government, with his audacious politics and insistent will, LaGuardia was able to use the moment to permanently alter the scope of municipal government. And unlike the mayors who followed him, he was also able to use Robert Moses and control him, to make the most of this moment.

Notes

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5. On the Seabury investigation, see Herbert Mitgang, *The Man Who Rode the Tiger: The Life and Times of Judge Samuel Seabury* (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott, 1963), pp. 219-243.
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17. *Albany Times Union* (June 28, 1935); *New York Times* (October 29, 1940).
18. Peter Marcuse, "Public Housing in the United States in the 1930s: The Case in New York City." Paper delivered before Conference on Public Housing in New York, Columbia University, October 12–14, 1984. Langdon Post, "Memorandum on a Comprehensive Housing Program" January 18, 1935 (New York Housing Authority Papers, LaGuardia Archives; hereafter, NYCHA Papers); *New York Daily News* (November 28, 1933).
19. Post, *ibid.*; Post to FDR, January 21, 1935 (NYCHA Papers).
20. Nathan Straus, "Low Cost Housing Here and Abroad, Report to Mayor LaGuardia" (NYCHA Papers).
21. *New York Times* (October 21, 1935).
22. Kessner, *LaGuardia and Modern New York*, pp. 430–431.
23. Robert Moses to Fiorello LaGuardia, August 29, 1938 (LaGuardia Papers, Box 35, New York Municipal Archives; hereafter, LaGuardia Papers, NYMA); Moses to Alfred Rheinstein, November 18, 22, 1938; July 1, 7, September 18, 1939 (NYCHA Papers).
24. Caro, *Power Broker*, pp. 611–612; *New York Times* (November 24, 25, 1938; June 24, 1939).
25. Kessner, *LaGuardia and Modern New York*, pp. 404–406, 554; Wallace Sayre and Herbert Kaufman, *Governing New York City* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1960), p. 372. My view of the relationship between Moses and LaGuardia is in *LaGuardia and Modern New York*, pp. 316–

- 319, 411–415, 428, 452–459; but Caro's *Power Broker* is proof enough. After explaining in dramatic fashion that Moses had made LaGuardia understand that he was LaGuardia's equal (this conclusion is rather perversely offered after Moses loses his fight to build a Brooklyn Battery Bridge), Caro cannot prove his assertion of Moses' dominance and is reduced to changing the topic with a little scandalmongering about Moses' relationship with his wife and his brother. Indeed, this leaves a serious gap in the book's narrative account of Moses' career. Despite its more than 1,200 pages, Caro can find little evidence of major accomplishments (except for some evidence of Moses' spite work) for the years between 1938 and 1945, when LaGuardia capped Moses' urge for power. Caro, *Power Broker*, pp. 577–688.
26. Kessner, *LaGuardia and Modern New York*, pp. 554–555.
 27. *Oakland Daily News* (November 4, 1937).
 28. "New York Opens Its Post War Exhibit," *The American City* (May 1944): 5; Fiorello LaGuardia, "Vast Public Works Program Essential to Full Time Production," *The American City* (September 1945): 101; *New York Times* (December 20, 1940). See also LaGuardia to FDR, February 9, 1943 (LaGuardia Papers, NYMA); FDR to LaGuardia, September 23, 1945 (FDR Library); Henry A. Wallace to LaGuardia, August 16, 1944 (Wallace Papers, FDR Library).
 29. Citizens Budget Commission, *Annual Report* (1945), p. 9; Rexford G. Tugwell, *The Art of Politics as Practiced by Three Great Americans: Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Luis Munoz Marin, and Fiorello H. LaGuardia* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1958), pp. 28–30.