

CHAPTER 4

New York Solidifies Its Character

Between the depressions of 1874 and 1929, New York experienced three significant "spirals" of growth, ones that both drove and were facilitated by major advances in transport and communications. Each was fed by its own demographic dynamic and each was accompanied by its own form of political reorganization.

The first cycle spanned the building boom bracketed between two severe economic contractions, which occurred in the early 1870s and in the early 1890s. During this growth cycle, most expansion took place on Manhattan Island itself, and the force behind it was massive immigration from abroad.¹ Stimulated by this infusion, major changes in land uses and heightened densities became evident in the already built-up portions of the island. Industrial establishments multiplied, assisted by the virtually unlimited supplies of cheap immigrant labor and fueled by the new demands for affordable housing and for an urban infrastructure that the expanding population and a redefinition of municipal functions and standards entailed.

At first, some still-existing vacant spaces were filled in, primarily on the eastern side of the island, as new tenement houses were constructed on the Lower East Side to accommodate the immigrants.² This immigrant "port of entry" became grossly overcrowded, as we shall see. The lower tip of Manhattan also became more densely developed, but also more exclusively commercial, industrial, and administrative, as taller structures replaced many of the brownstones and mansions formerly occupied by Gotham's movers and shakers. The wealthy were relocating to midtown and upper Fifth Avenue along the eastern borders of Central Park. There was even some expansion into the periphery, as the original farming village of Harlem was transformed into New York's "first suburb," and as the still-independent town of Brooklyn became more closely integrated with Manhattan and began to sprout its own suburbs.

The population infusions led to increased social segregation between the "classes" and even "castes" in the city.³ And the struggles for power—between old and new elites, between old and new immigrants, and between old and new models for government—set the basic framework for New York's divisive politics, or, to put it more positively, honed the skills of multiple groups to form coalitions and to negotiate outcomes. These became parts of the political culture of the city, a civic culture that in many ways still operates in the present.

The second cycle, from the turn of the century through World War I, was marked by a maturation of New York's economy as an industrial and commercial powerhouse and by the refinement of its complex financial system, which increasingly dominated the nation. One of the most important changes in this period was the political consolidation of Manhattan with its peripheral boroughs, which, in one fell swoop, vastly multiplied the area and almost doubled the population within the city's jurisdiction. A commensurate physical unification was achieved through the construction of bridges and then of a vast subway system to supplement (and eventually replace) the elevated street railways already in use, although the last elevated line in Manhattan would not be demolished until 1958. The larger city experimented with a variety of rules, regulations on land uses, and inchoate attempts to plan future developments, casting a competitive eye on Chicago's Master Plan of 1909 but unable to replicate that feat. Toward the end of the second cycle, however, foreign immigration ceased to be the driving force of demographic growth. European immigrants were beginning to be replaced by a migration of southern-born (and Caribbean) African Americans to the city during the war-induced labor shortages that appeared during World War I.

The third cycle, which began in earnest as the war drew to a close, saw a sharp drop in immigration from abroad due to drastically restrictive changes in U.S. immigration laws, continued black migration from the South, and a new burst of explosive construction that pushed the envelope of development well beyond the city's limits, as fast-growing suburban communities began to dot the adjacent counties of Nassau, Westchester, and even Suffolk. This period also witnessed the start of a process known as residential "white flight"—at first from overcrowded Manhattan to the more expansive districts of the so-called outer boroughs, and eventually farther out into the suburban fringe.⁴ In some congested zones, such as the Lower East Side, the population simply thinned out to more bearable densities; in other neighborhoods, the spaces freed up by departing residents were made available to the growing black community. It was during this third period that Harlem became the largest African American "city" in the world.

By the early twentieth century, it had become absolutely impossible to extend New York City's boundaries. This meant that its legal jurisdiction fell increasingly short of its metropolitan extent. Coordinated developments became more difficult, and different mechanisms, outside existing political structures, had to be invented. It was then that special districts and "authorities" were institutionalized to supplement and even substitute for municipal rule, and informal "regional" plans were advocated to guide a metropolitan expansion that could no longer be encompassed by city

government. Because of New York's unique constellation of waterways, ports, and "inconvenient" state boundaries, this required inventiveness of the highest order.

Paralleling the process of horizontal expansion was a shift upward in the vertical scale, and here, too, the "role of the state" was central. True skyscrapers came to dominate the skyline of lower Manhattan, as steel-frame structures and elevators became the taken-for-granted clichés of new construction. Zoning, first experimented with in New York City in 1916, was adopted as a planning mechanism for controlling densities and land uses in the city.⁵ It also had a forming effect on the skyline of Manhattan, as we shall see later.

THE NEW ERA BEGINS WITH IMMIGRATION

By 1880, the total population of Manhattan was approaching 1.2 million, and almost all the land south of 42nd Street had been built up. The next wave of demographic increase would push settlement uptown and would thus mark a transformation not only of the Upper East Side but of more outlying zones as well. Much of the city's subsequent growth would not have occurred without immigration, especially because, in the late nineteenth century as during the contemporary period, there may even have been a net out-migration of native-born New Yorkers from Manhattan. Their loss was more than compensated for by foreign immigrants.

The year 1881 marks the beginning of the great emigration of Jews from Russia and of Italian peasants from the *mezzogiorno*.⁶ Between 1881 and 1905 some 850,000 new immigrants arrived in New York, where most of them remained. Their chief urban "port of entry" was the Lower East Side, which experienced a tremendous spurt in tenement-house construction to accommodate them.⁷ Severe overcrowding accompanied this influx. Indeed, during the half century of immigration between 1855 and 1905, the population living on Manhattan's Lower East Side (below 14th Street and east of the Bowery) increased two and a half times, from just under 200,000 in 1855 to more than 518,000 by 1905. The total peaked at 542,000 in 1910, at which time almost two out of every three residents had been born abroad and the district was reputed to be the most densely settled urban quarter in the world.⁸

This immigrant labor fed the growing garment trade, which preempted more and more space in downtown loft structures, thus heightening the competition among residential, commercial, and industrial users. And it intensified the city's quintessential characteristic—its cultural and linguistic diversity. As Jackson has pointed out, New York was (and still remains)

particularly unusual in the extraordinary heterogeneity of its citizens. Between 1890 and 1919, more than 23 million Europeans emigrated to the United States; about 17 million of them disembarked in New York. . . . as early as 1880 more than half of the city's working population was foreign-born, providing New York with the largest immigrant labour force on earth. Half a century later, the city still contained two million foreign born . . . and an even larger number of persons of foreign parentage. . . . New York [was] . . . a hodge-podge of nationalities.⁹

In the 1880s alone, the newcomer Jews from eastern Europe and Italians from southern Europe, who overwhelmed the continuing flow from the older traditional sources in central Europe and the British Isles, infused the city with almost 300,000 additional residents.¹⁰ But it would be a mistake to confuse magnitude with proportion. In 1860, before the second migration wave struck, 47 percent of Manhattan's population of 813,669 had been born outside the United States. Thereafter, the proportion of foreign-born Manhattanites dropped gradually, to 44.5 percent by 1870, before stabilizing at about 40 percent in 1880 and 1890.¹¹ (The proportion of Manhattan's population that was foreign-born would peak again at 47 percent by 1910, before gently subsiding.)

Dispersal and Uneven Development

This anomaly of a stabilizing proportion of foreign-born at the very time when immigration was peaking can be understood only in the context of the wider region and, more specifically, the relationship between the "twin cities" of Manhattan and Brooklyn (which remained separate municipalities until 1898). Improved transportation connections made possible the diffusion of some heavier industry and an associated labor force from Manhattan to Brooklyn, even before the two cities were juridically joined.

By 1878 Manhattan's elevated railway system was completed, not only binding together the already built-up areas but opening up new ones, such as Harlem and the lower Bronx, for settlement.¹² And finally, in 1883, the Brooklyn Bridge accepted its first wheeled and pedestrian traffic, making it more possible to decentralize industry and residences to the eastern shore of the East River by physically joining the two cities, which, by then, were already functionally linked. This facilitated the development of immigrant "second settlement" areas in hitherto more native-born Brooklyn.¹³

Manhattan's relationship to its "sister city" of Brooklyn (the latter old and already well developed and containing a population half as large as Manhattan's by 1880) was thus changed. Brooklyn began to absorb a larger number of the more established foreign-born and their American-born children. In the two decades following the construction of the bridge, Brooklyn's population soared from about 600,000 (of whom only about 31 percent had been born abroad) to well over a million (37 percent born abroad).¹⁴ If the figures for Manhattan and Brooklyn are cumulated, we find that foreigners constituted 45 percent of their combined population in 1860, 42 percent in 1870, 37 percent in 1880, 39 percent in 1890, and 37 percent as late as 1900. Indeed, between 1880 and 1900 the number of foreign-born residents of Manhattan and Brooklyn increased by more than 600,000 (net of those who merely passed through on their way to other places).¹⁵

This diffusion of the foreign-born paralleled the general decentralization of population in the metropolitan region that had been taking place since the mid-nineteenth century, but the pace picked up as population burgeoned and transit improved. The metropolitan region had even begun to overflow into the still sparsely settled adjacent counties of Queens, Richmond, and lower Westchester (later the Bronx).

Whereas in 1830 Manhattan contained 84 percent of the total population living in all five boroughs, by 1890, the last census date before their consolidation into "Greater New York City," Manhattan accounted for only 58 percent of the combined population of 2.5 million. By then, another 33 percent were living in Brooklyn. The remaining three boroughs were still very sparsely populated, with the Bronx and Queens accounting for only 3.5 percent each, and Richmond (i.e., Staten Island) containing less than 2 percent.¹⁶ After the consolidation of the five boroughs in 1898, no new territory would be added to enlarge Greater New York's boundaries.¹⁷

As might therefore be anticipated, there were wide discrepancies in the residential densities of the five boroughs. Pratt points out that Manhattan, as early as 1850, was more densely settled than the other boroughs would be by 1910.¹⁸ By the latter year, when residential densities in Manhattan had reached 166 persons per acre, Greater New York City had an overall density of only 24 persons/acre, and of the four outer boroughs, only Brooklyn, with 33 persons/acre, exceeded this average by a narrow margin.

Not only were there sharp contrasts between the island and the outer boroughs, but by the turn of the century Manhattan itself was beginning to evince more marked class, ethnic, and racial polarities, the visibility of which was heightened by greater residential segregation. As the Lower East Side and Greenwich Village came to be dominated by the new immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, the last remnants of the bourgeoisie deserted lower Manhattan; they followed the wealthy uptown. By the 1880s, "fashionable" residential districts began to appear north of 59th Street along Central Park, thus fulfilling the promises made decades earlier by the park's proponents.

But such movement was highly selective; it followed the perimeter of the park only on its eastern side.¹⁹ The Upper West Side lagged far behind, and that zone was marked particularly by its widespread and desolate empty lots (see Figure 4.1), although development leaped over these neglected spaces to encompass Manhattan's first "true suburb," Harlem, which was opened for upper-class residence in the late 1870s when the elevated rail line was extended to it. Clearly, additional incentives were needed to attract development to the West Side.²⁰ Therefore, in 1889 proposals were put forth to build Riverside and Morningside Parks, in order to stimulate West Side development.

HANDLING THE BOTTLENECKS

Political Consolidation

By 1890, Manhattan, with a population of 1.4 million, was thus already embedded in a "metropolitanized" zone of some 2.5 million, accessible (as before) by ferries and now, thanks to the Brooklyn Bridge, by a limited land connection as well.²¹ What it most required to coordinate its growth with that of its periphery was political unification. As early as 1874, the city had annexed the southernmost portion of Westchester County, but it was not until 1898 that Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, and additional parts of Westchester (now known as the Bronx) were consolidated into the five boroughs that today constitute the city of New York.

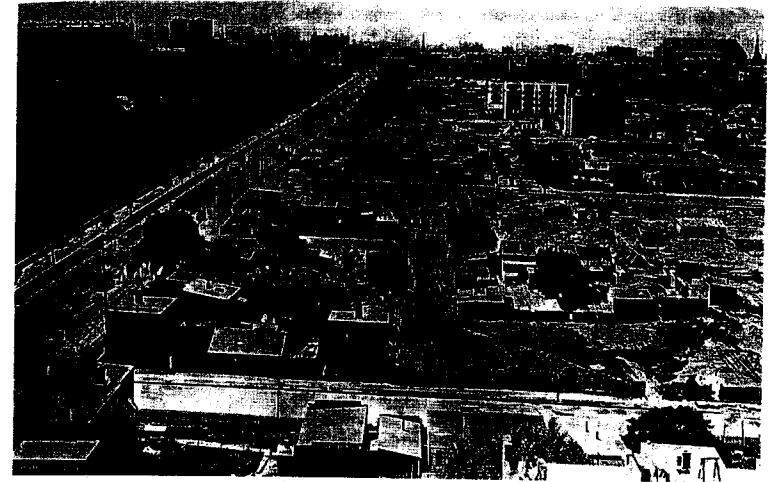


Figure 4.1. The isolation of the first apartment house in the Upper West Side. View south from the roof of the Dakota apartment house, Central Park West and 72nd Street. Photograph by H. B. Jackson, New York City, 1887. Courtesy of The New-York Historical Society, with thanks to M. Christine Boyer; copyright Collection of The New-York Historical Society.

In 1898, the state legislature approved a new city charter for this larger unit that, together with the amendments passed in 1901 and subsequent years, created the complex federated structure of governance for the city that operated for years to come.²² The original 1898 charter added a second level to the executive branch headed by the commonly elected mayor—the "presidents" elected from each of the boroughs, who were responsible for local administration and public works at the borough (county) level. Coordination and financial control for the combined boroughs were exercised through a unified Board of Estimate (sometimes called the Board of Estimate and Appropriations).²³ For the legislative branch, amendments in 1901 collapsed the original bicameral Municipal Assembly and Board of Aldermen into a single Board of Aldermen, consisting of seventy-three elected representatives, one from each district in the greater city. Membership on the all-powerful Board of Estimate and Appropriations was expanded to include the presidents of the separate boroughs as well as the mayor, the comptroller, and the president of the Board of Aldermen. The major outlines of this system remained in force, with only minor modifications,²⁴ until a federal district court ruled, in November 1986, that the Board of Estimate system was unconstitutional because it violated the principle of "one man, one vote." This decision, upheld by the court of appeals and eventually by the U.S. Supreme Court, thus forced a charter revision in 1989 that enlarged the city council and strengthened its powers while significantly weakening the executive branch. But these changes were still in the future.²⁵

By the turn of the century, then, Greater New York City had come into existence, pushing the total population to almost three and a half million. This consolidation greatly strengthened the "voice" of the city (and its Democratic machine) vis-à-vis state government and provided it with additional resources and powers to plan for a more coordinated development. Jackson calls the period that followed a "golden age" for the city, a time when the wealth of America was concentrated in its coffers and the talents of its citizens selectively concentrated there as well.

The years between the consolidation of 1898 and the end of World War Two presented a kind of "golden age" for New York. It contained the largest concentrations of architects, bankers, lawyers, consulting engineers, industrial designers, and corporate officials on the continent. . . . Manhattan became a kind of Main Street to the nation. . . . According to an 1892 survey, New York and Brooklyn contained . . . 30 per cent of the extreme wealth holders in the United States. Another 15 per cent lived in the nearby suburbs.²⁶

Physical Unification via the Subway System

Accompanying and facilitated by the political unification was a commensurate and much-needed physical transformation—the construction of a vast subway system that would eventually reach 722 miles in extent, which is about the same number of miles separating New York from Chicago.²⁷ This integrated the five boroughs via what is still, today, the longest rapid-transit system in the world.

New York was late in beginning this project, although not for lack of interest. It was generally acknowledged that the extant system of mass transit—the elevated railway cars that screeched above the major avenues, darkening the roadways, spewing black smog into the air, and democratically depositing oil and cinders on the heads of pedestrians below—was totally inadequate for the region's growing needs. Various "schemes" for a subway were first proposed just after London commenced building its underground in the 1860s, but the complexity of preannexation political conditions in New York, coupled with the ongoing tensions between the commercial/business elite and the Tammany machine, as well as understandable fears of uncontrollable graft that were residues of Tweed-era scandals, led to several false starts. The problems were compounded by an ultimate indecisiveness as to how the more ambitious plans for New York could be financed and managed.²⁸

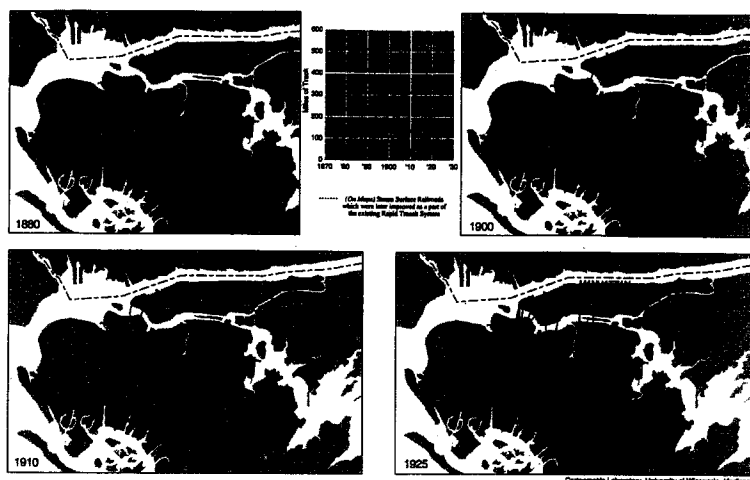
By the mid-1870s there was general consensus that faster and cleaner mass transit was needed if urban growth was not to be deflected to zones that lay beyond the taxing jurisdiction of the city.²⁹ The controversies concerning how to finance and build this enormously ambitious system and who should own it were finally resolved in the 1890s through an arrangement that anticipated the currently much-touted "public-private partnership." The city would finance the project through bonds, but it would be built and managed by and as a business firm.

In 1900 financier and entrepreneur August Belmont³⁰ agreed to build, equip, and operate the line in return for a long-term lease and \$36.5 million to cover land



Figure 4.2. Photograph by Berenice Abbott of the shadows cast by either the Second or the Third Avenue elevated lines. Works Progress Administration project, 1935.

acquisition and construction costs.³¹ Politically enabling legislation (the Rapid Transit Act of 1891) was passed in Albany, backed by reform progressives and pushed by a sympathetic governor, and in April 1892 Belmont formed the Interborough Rapid Transit Company (IRT), appointing William Barclay Parsons as his chief engineer. Given the tricky hard schist rock of Manhattan (sometimes fiercely resistant, sometimes cracking perilously) and a terrain that sloped sharply up at the northern end of



Map 4.1. Expansion of the various New York subway lines, 1880 to 1925.

the island, the engineering challenge was formidable. And, as might have been anticipated, construction took a long time, and the cost overruns were phenomenally large.

Nevertheless, on October 27, 1904, the first segment of the subway line was ceremonially dedicated and then opened to masses of users who stood in line to experience the marvel. By 1908 the IRT lines extended all the way to the Bronx and across the East River to Brooklyn, opening vast territories to urban growth. In just four years the fission of the city into its hinterlands was an accomplished fact. Between 1905 and 1920, the population of Manhattan north of 125th Street "grew 265 percent, to 323,800, and the population of the Bronx advanced 150 percent, to 430,980."³² Population growth continually outstripped carrying capacity, however, and two other companies were organized to expand the system further: the Brooklyn Manhattan Transit (BMT) and the Independent Subway System (IND). Eventually, they would be brought under a single municipal authority.

In the 1920s and 1930s, when other major cities were favoring highways, neglecting their rapid-transit systems, or, like Los Angeles, abandoning their already proposed plans for more street railways, New York remained adamantly nonconformist. Even as late as 1990, almost half of the labor force living in the five boroughs used public transportation to get to work. Contrast this with the less than 20 percent in Cook County (including Chicago) and the 6.5 percent in Los Angeles County (including the city of Los Angeles) who depended upon mass transit for their journeys to work.³³ If one were looking for the truly basic variable that distinguishes New York from Chicago and Los Angeles and gives rise to its unique form of city building and city life, this would be it.

THE FURTHER DECENTRALIZATION OF RESIDENCES AND EMPLOYMENT

The effects on Manhattan of this revolution in transport were dramatic. The mass-transit system facilitated the separation of work from residence, the conversion of high-value land on the island to concentrated commercial uses, and the dispersal of residences to what came to be called the "outer boroughs."³⁴ As Jackson points out:

The population of Manhattan reached a peak of 2.3 million in 1910. By 1940, it had declined to 1.9 million. . . . The outlying boroughs . . . exhibited a strong contrary pattern. Brooklyn . . . grew from 1.2 million in 1890 to 2.7 million in 1940. . . . Scarcely developed at all and containing only 89,000 inhabitants in 1890, the Bronx was covered with six- and eight-storey apartments . . . by 1940 when its population reached 1.4 million. Queens blossomed from less than 100,000 in 1890 to 1.3 million in 1940. . . . *about one-half of the population [of NYC] in 1905 lived within four miles of City Hall; by 1925, the percentage in this area was below 30.*³⁵

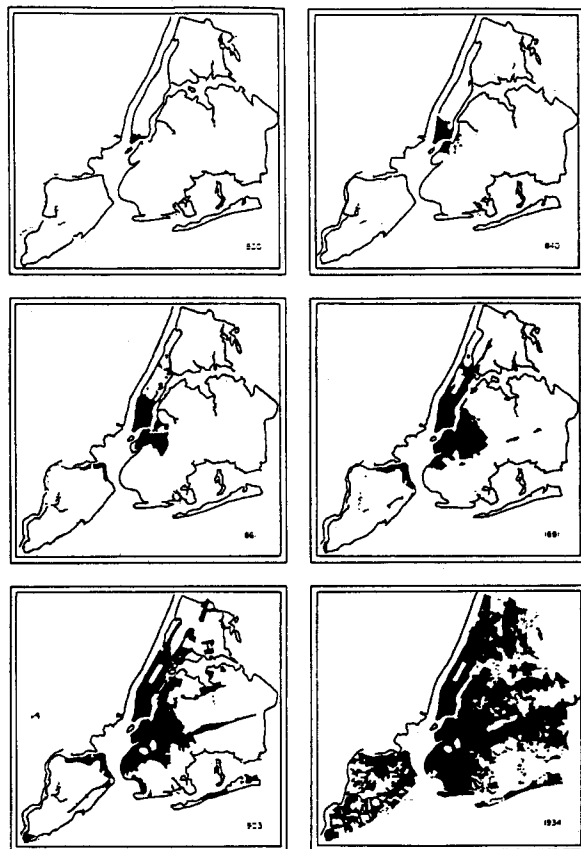
THE GROWTH AND DECENTRALIZATION OF EMPLOYMENT

As we have already seen, decentralization of population had already begun as early as the mid-nineteenth century, but the pace picked up decisively after political consolidation and subway construction. Once the boroughs were united politically and physically, the locations of employment sites began to shift with these changes in the shape and functions of the metropolitan region. However, their effects were not uniform; some functions decentralized whereas others became even more concentrated at the core.

It must be emphasized that manufacturing, in general, had been increasing at a remarkable pace, both in Manhattan and in the outer boroughs. Pratt estimates that in the fifty years between 1860 and 1910 the value of manufactured products in the New York region increased from \$159 million to \$1.5 billion, with most of the increase occurring in the final decades of that half century.³⁶ In part, this reflected both the dramatic multiplication of individual firms, which rose from 4,317 in the early year to almost 26,000 by 1906, and the increased number of workers employed in manufacturing, which rose from 91,671 in 1860 to 611,738 by 1910.³⁷

While such figures parallel the process of industrialization that was occurring in other major urban centers around the turn of the century, Pratt's study highlights one of the unique and continuing features of manufacturing in New York, namely, the degree to which it resisted the increases in plant scale evident in other industrial centers such as Chicago (see Chapter 5) and Philadelphia.³⁸ In 1860, the average number of workers per manufacturing establishment in Manhattan had been nineteen; by 1900 this had actually dropped to an average of thirteen for the five boroughs and fourteen for Manhattan alone. As we shall see, this had major implications for industrial relations and the form that unionization and labor mobilization would take in the city.

A second notable feature of New York's manufacturing sector was the persistence of lower Manhattan's dominance as an industrial district, despite the proliferation of



Map 4.2. The growth of settled areas of New York City, 1800 to 1934.
Courtesy of the Federal Housing Administration, Washington, D.C.

plants being newly established in or moving to the outer boroughs. In 1860, Manhattan had accounted for an overwhelming 78 percent of all establishments and 85 percent of all jobs in manufacturing in the five-borough region. But even as late as 1900, 68 percent of all establishments and 75 percent of all workers in manufacturing were still on the island. The concentration was even more extreme than these figures suggest, because almost all industrial activity was found on the southern tip of the island, below 14th Street.³⁹

Garment manufacturing remained concentrated in that area of Manhattan, although bundle or piecework was sent out to second-settlement immigrant areas in the

Bronx and Brooklyn. Printing also remained in the center city, as did such consumer-linked trades as baking, slaughtering, and custom furniture making. But decentralization of bulkier and more noxious industries was well under way; such firms were departing to lower-cost land, particularly because a local labor force was now available off the island. This trend was noted with approval as early as 1911, in Pratt's remarkably detailed and prescient study of the causes of Manhattan's residential congestion.

After studying the demographic developments in both Manhattan and the outlying boroughs, surveying the growth of industry in the city, and even interviewing a variety of industrialists about their decisions to remain in Manhattan or to relocate, Pratt concluded:

There has been considerable movement of manufactures from Manhattan, which has taken two directions. First, there has been a removal of factories to the outlying or suburban districts of the metropolitan area. This is a distinct movement from the center of the city to its periphery. In the second place, there has been a movement from the city to more distant points entirely outside the industrial district of New York. The industrial history of New York City furnishes several instances of the removal of entire industries. Iron foundries have long ceased to exist in Manhattan; the stone and marble cutters found property too expensive and moved to the Long Island City waterfront; the boot and shoe industry needed air and light; it moved out of Manhattan, many factories going to Brooklyn. Some of the largest industries in the nearby Jersey towns were once located in New York City. The movement is going on slowly but steadily; factories are moving out of Manhattan and others are preparing to leave.⁴⁰

And, as he predicted, this trend continued. By 1919 much of the electronics industry had moved to New Jersey, and by 1929, Chicago had displaced New York as the chief producer of electronics.

Compensating for the stagnation in the growth of its heavy industry, Manhattan concentrated even more on its important function as the center of "information" for the United States. By 1885, the city was already the nation's leader in publishing, having "swept past Boston as the centre of book and magazine publishing." Not only headquarters but printing establishments continued to be centralized in lower Manhattan, in part because of the availability of skilled labor, in part because of proximity to publishers and writers. "And when the new science of telecommunications developed in the 1920s, New York became the home of the major radio and television [*sic*] networks."⁴¹

Producer and corporate services also continued their dominance as contributors to the city's economic base, and these, too, were located almost exclusively in lower Manhattan. Stock market transactions grew many times over, as partnerships and limited companies gave way to corporate forms of organization,⁴² and as ownership, in the form of stocks, was separated from the managerial functions performed by a new class of "professionals." Bankers, brokers, lawyers, and workers in insurance firms were all overrepresented in Manhattan, in comparison with both the nation and the rest of the metropolitan area.⁴³

Also remaining concentrated in Manhattan, however, were a large variety of jobs at the lowest end of the class spectrum, not only in the highly exploitative garment industry, but in many of the menial occupations that served the growing consumption demands of the wealthy: domestics, janitors, hotel and restaurant workers, and the like. All of these occupations shared one characteristic. Instead of workers being congregated in large factories, which Marx had predicted would create the conditions for class consciousness and labor mobilization, they were employed in multiple scattered sites, which precluded easy contacts and solidarity. It is therefore all the more remarkable that these trades were among the first to be unionized; some of the first significant strikes in New York were mounted in these occupations.⁴⁴

The garment trade, in particular, became increasingly subject to labor strife, given that it employed the largest number of "industrial" workers in New York. The year 1909 marks the "Uprising of the Twenty Thousand," which demonstrated the growing strength of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. Especially after the disastrous Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire in 1911, agitation for better working conditions grew.⁴⁵ Mobilization spread to the fur workers and also to the hotel workers, another of the earliest occupations to organize. Both struck against their employers in 1912. Two years later, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union was founded, adding to the bargaining power of workers and incorporating even those who had moved to the Bronx and Brooklyn.⁴⁶

The peculiar organization of these trades, concentrated in Manhattan but at so many small sites, may paradoxically have facilitated more labor strength. While it was true that Manhattan employers benefited from the enormous immigrant pool to obtain cheap and to some extent easily substitutable workers, employees also had the (often dubious) advantage of being able to choose among a large number of possible places of employment, which reduced their dependence upon and commitment to a single employer. In a trenchant passage, Pratt compares the trade-offs between firms located in less diversified places, where workers might be more loyal but not as easily replaced, to conditions in Manhattan:

In a manufacturing plant in New York City it is a comparatively easy matter for employees to break away from a particular establishment, because it is common knowledge there are many other establishments engaged in the same line of business. . . . The employers, on the other hand, feel little responsibility toward any particular group of workmen. They discharge men with impunity and immediately draw anew from the overflowing labor market all around them. . . . [Because of this] the relations between employers and employees are comparatively loose and can be severed much more readily with less cost to either, unless the working force is a very large and well organized one, or the dispute is one involving an entire trade.⁴⁷

Thus, of necessity, unions *had* to organize around given trades, rather than around specific industrial sites. In this, they were aided by ethnic affinities and communal loyalties that went beyond class solidarity.

Given the expansions in municipal functions that were also occurring at this

time, however, the largest single employer of menial labor was becoming the city government itself. During the Progressive Era, many of the functions that had been performed by private utilities were coming to be incorporated into municipal ownership or regulation, and many of the expanding municipal service jobs that had fallen under the corrupt patronage of political bosses were being converted to civil service positions. This, in itself, stimulated labor mobilizations, such as the 1907 strike of New York's garbage workers.⁴⁸ Such strikes of municipal workers would become increasingly common in the later years of the city's history.⁴⁹

THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY'S PLACE IN THE SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL STRUCTURE OF NEW YORK

In comparison to the foreign-born, the number of black residents in New York remained relatively insignificant until the labor shortage that characterized the period of the First World War and the reduced quotas restricting immigration in the 1920s. Indeed, the proportion of black residents had fallen considerably below what it had been in the early days of the colony, when black slaves and freemen may have made up 10 percent or more of the total.⁵⁰

Slaves from Africa and the Caribbean had been a part of New York's history from the beginning. The first slaves arrived with the Dutch in 1626, and the system grew harsher under British rule.⁵¹ However, New York was among the most liberal states in the nation (in contrast to the rampant racism evident in Illinois, to be described in Chapter 5). Its legislature recognized manumission and during the Revolutionary War even "passed an act granting freedom to all slaves who served in the army for three years or until honorably discharged."⁵² The state's first constitution of 1777 extended suffrage to free blacks, provided they met the other requirements, and slavery was officially abolished by 1827. Nevertheless, of the twenty-six thousand "Negroes" in New York State counted by the first census in 1790, less than one-fifth were freemen,⁵³ and between 1827, when slavery was abolished in the state, and 1863, when slavery ended nationwide, "the condition of the Negro in New York City was anomalous and precarious . . . neither slave nor citizen; he had neither the protection of a master nor full equality before the law."⁵⁴ By the census of 1830, there were some forty-five thousand free "Negroes" in the state, of whom only about one-third lived in Manhattan. Those numbers remained remarkably constant throughout much of the nineteenth century. Although blacks were thus too few to constitute quarters of their own, the slum of Five Points (now the governmental zone around City Hall) contained a large concentration of very poor blacks, at least until they were displaced northward by the incoming Irish. There was a second, more "respectable," enclave in Greenwich Village, then referred to as "Little Africa," which housed a wider range of class positions, including some black tradesmen who had previously owned slaves themselves.⁵⁵

But the position of New York's small black population deteriorated as Irish and German immigrants displaced them in many trades. And by the time the new immigrants vented their anger during the draft riots of 1863, there were still only fifty

thousand blacks in the entire state, of whom fifteen thousand lived in the city.⁵⁶ After the Civil War, this population expanded significantly. By 1898 more than sixty thousand African Americans lived in Greater New York, mostly concentrated in a few zones of Manhattan.⁵⁷

By then, Italian immigrants had virtually replaced blacks in Greenwich Village and blacks were forming new concentrations farther uptown on the West Side, at first in the "Tenderloin" (New York's red-light district) and "Hell's Kitchen" (later renamed Clinton), especially after the noise and nuisance of elevated lines there drove out whites who had more choice. These transitions were not benign. Racial violence erupted in 1900, when rampaging whites invaded the Clinton quarter in a "brutish orgy, which, if it was not incited by the police, was, to say the least, abetted by them."⁵⁸ The riot of 1900 followed a pattern that was to become "classic" and widespread throughout the United States: indiscriminate and escalating white attacks (police and civilian) upon blacks.⁵⁹ With few exceptions (e.g., in New York in 1935 and again in 1943), race riots in American cities would follow this pattern up to the 1960s.⁶⁰

Origins of Harlem

Such hostilities, however, did not dampen migration. By 1910 the number of African Americans in Greater New York had risen to almost ninety-two thousand, of whom two-thirds lived in Manhattan, including the new district of Harlem well north of Central Park. But Harlem was not yet a ghetto. Originally a pleasant and pastoral farming community founded by Peter Stuyvesant, its population had remained remarkably stable for some two hundred years.⁶¹ However, the farmers, faced with declining crops from the depleted soil, "simply deserted the seemingly worthless property and went elsewhere. Formerly great estates were sold at public auction." By the mid-nineteenth century, Harlem had been reduced to a poor country village of shanties, huts, and an occasional farmhouse, and poor Irish immigrants had begun to squat on its vacant land.⁶²

Annexation and the extension of mass-transit lines changed the area's fate. After the 1870s, Harlem became Manhattan's first suburb, one developed primarily for the white upper-middle and upper classes. In 1873, the village was annexed to Manhattan, and between 1878 and 1881 three lines of elevated railroads were extended to 129th Street. Electric lights were installed in 1887 and telephone lines in 1889. All these developments touched off a massive wave of speculation and construction. "Rows of brownstones and exclusive apartment houses appeared overnight."⁶³

The area remained a living contradiction, however. While the newer housing attracted established wealthy families from downtown, together with newer municipal "luminaries,"⁶⁴ it still contained garbage dumps and poor people, including new Italian immigrants, at its less savory fringes.⁶⁵ A small Negro population also remained, which "gradually increased in size in the late nineteenth century as colored servants worked in homes of the wealthy who moved into the neighborhood."⁶⁶

The speculation that had fueled the first movement of the white bourgeoisie into

the area in the late 1870s and 1880s was repeated again in the late 1890s, in anticipation of the subway's extension. Between 1898 and 1904, when the Lenox Avenue line opened at 145th Street, "practically all the vacant land in Harlem" was "built over."⁶⁷ Not only private buyers but large insurance companies invested heavily, as did upwardly mobile eastern European Jews seeking an escape from the Lower East Side.⁶⁸

Rampant speculation between 1902 and 1905 drove the prices of land and buildings in Harlem to unsustainable heights. The bottom fell out of this market in the "bust" of 1904-5,⁶⁹ and it was only then, after "financial institutions no longer made loans to Harlem speculators and building-loan companies, and many foreclosed on their original mortgages . . . [that] large numbers of colored people began to settle in West Harlem. . . . Rather than face 'financial destruction' some landlords and corporations opened their houses to Negroes and collected the traditionally higher rents that colored people paid."⁷⁰ Even so, it was a long time before Harlem became predominantly black.⁷¹ Only with the new influx of African Americans at the beginning of World War I, coupled with "white flight," did the number of African Americans in the neighborhood approach fifty thousand.⁷²

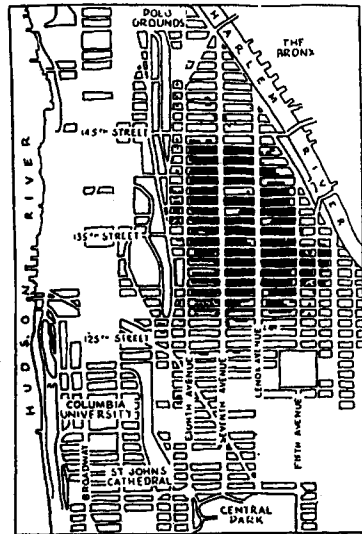
As in other northern cities, the labor shortage of World War I led recruiters to comb the South, dealing directly with black workers, arranging their transportation en masse, and shipping them in consignments of hundreds and even thousands.⁷³ Unlike the rural cotton folk who went to Chicago, however, New York's laborers were drawn more from southern cities and towns on the Atlantic seaboard and thus were "better prepared to adapt themselves to life and industry in a great city." In addition, a sizable number of migrants came from islands in the Caribbean, and they brought with them better education than migrants from the American South. This may be why they were better received.⁷⁴

As late as 1930, James Weldon Johnson observed that, in contrast to other large cities such as Chicago or Cleveland, where expansions of "nascent black belts" were met with bombs, this did not happen in New York:

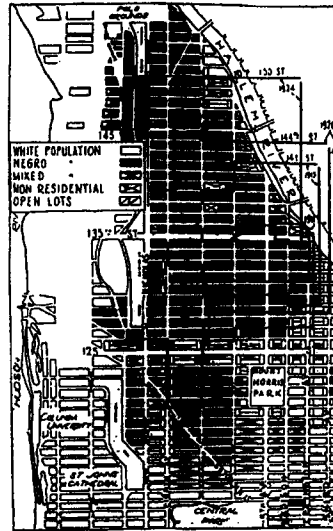
Although there was bitter feeling in Harlem during the fifteen years of struggle the Negro went through in getting a foothold . . . there was never any demonstration of violence that could be called serious. Not since the riot of 1900 has New York witnessed, except for minor incidents, any interracial disturbances. Not even in the memorable summer of 1919 . . . did New York, with more than a hundred thousand Negroes grouped together in Harlem, lose its equanimity.⁷⁵

He hypothesized two reasons for the somewhat more peaceful race relations in the city. First, he noted that blacks were "employed more as individuals than as non-integral parts of a gang," which gave them "more intimate contacts with the life and spirit of the city as a whole," a fact not unrelated to the small scale of enterprises that I have described above.⁷⁶ And further, he attributed New York's greater tolerance to

the natural psychology of a truly cosmopolitan city, in which there is always the tendency to minimize rather than magnify distinctions. . . . New York, more than any other American city, maintains a matter-of-fact, a taken-for-granted



Negro Harlem 1925



Negro Harlem 1930

Map 4.3. The growth of "black" Harlem between 1925 and 1930. Source: James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan*; the map appears in this 1930 classic, opposite page 146.

attitude towards her Negro citizens. Less there than anywhere else in the country are Negroes regarded as occupying a position of wardship; more nearly do they stand upon the footing of common and equal citizenship. It may be that one of the causes of New York's attitude lies in the fact that the Negro there has achieved a large degree of political independence; that he has broken away from a political creed based merely upon traditional and sentimental grounds. Yet, on the other hand, this itself may be a result of New York's attitude.⁷⁷

Although in retrospect this evaluation seems overly romantic, it does capture some of the optimism of the period, when the Harlem Renaissance was flowering and an interracial culture seemed pregnant with great possibilities.⁷⁸

The Making of the Harlem Ghetto

By 1920, at the beginning of its great cultural renaissance, Harlem was becoming a predominantly black neighborhood that housed two-thirds of Manhattan's African Americans and served as a mecca for the rest.⁷⁹ Because of the special manner in which blacks had fallen heir to this new and elegant suburb, it was unique among the urban ghettos that were forming in other northern cities. Osofsky emphasizes that "its streets and avenues were broad, well-paved, clean and tree-lined . . . [and] its homes . . . spacious . . . with . . . modern facilities." Far from being a slum, it was "an

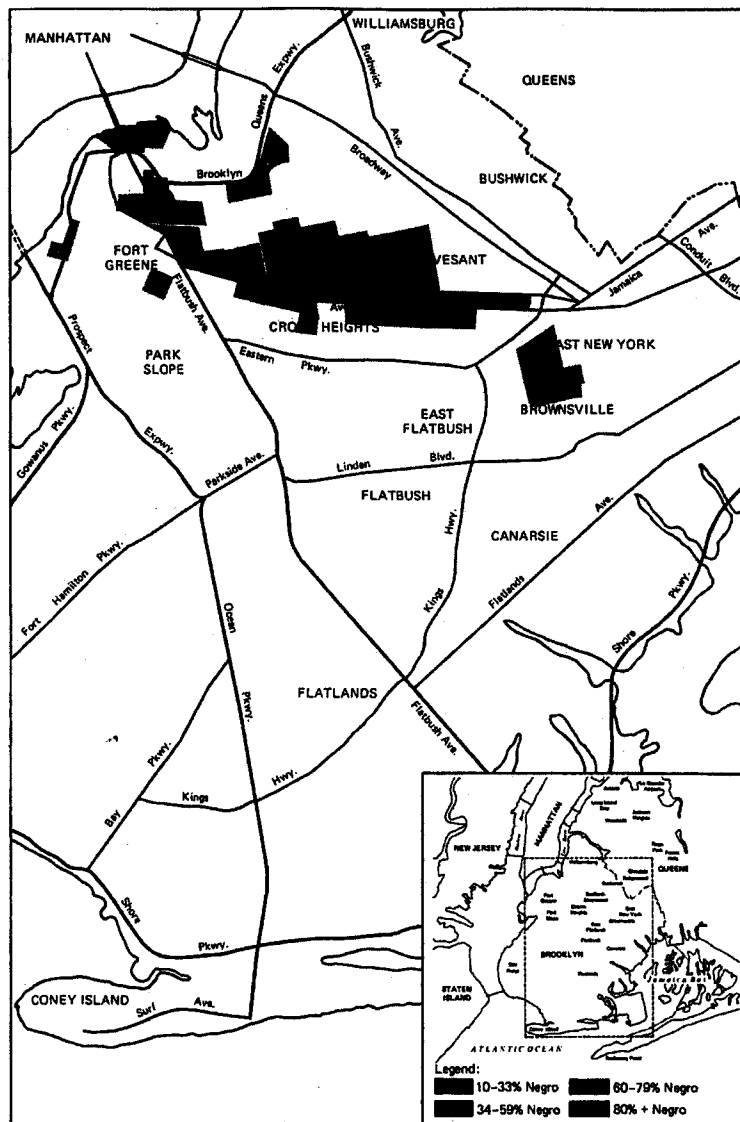
ideal place in which to live," albeit an expensive one, given that African Americans were overcharged.⁸⁰

But despite the overly optimistic hopes of black scholars such as Johnson, the area was becoming increasingly degraded, because its boundaries could not be expanded fast enough to keep pace with its growing population. Between World War I and the Depression, most of Harlem's remaining white population left for other boroughs, their places more than taken by a massive influx of rural southern blacks. In 1910, the number of African Americans in all five boroughs was still fewer than 100,000; by 1920 this number had risen to more than 150,000, and by 1930 it stood at more than 325,000. Most lived in the expanding black "city" of Harlem. In 1930, more than three-quarters of the city's black population were migrants born outside New York State. Although most hailed from the South, a surprisingly large number had been born abroad, primarily in the Caribbean.⁸¹ Competition for jobs and doubling up in scarce housing were already problems for New York's black population even before the Depression struck. And when it did, the Harlem of the 1920s became the segregated deteriorating zone of the 1930s, increasingly isolated from the city around it and vulnerable to even greater hardships than would be faced by other residents of New York. By then, a second area of black concentration had begun to form in the Bedford-Stuyvesant district of Brooklyn. (See Map 4.4.)

THE EXPANSION OF MUNICIPAL FUNCTIONS AND POLITICAL REFORM

"Diversity" in New York permeated not only the proletariat but the elite elements of the city as well. Although the conventional narrative of elite succession in New York's politics pits the older refined Protestant mercantile elite against the corrupt immigrant-dominated political machine in a battle for control, the actual story is far more complicated.⁸² Even Jaher, who hews closely to this line, acknowledges that by the 1890s the "Old Guard" had already been "engulfed by a massive tide of [rich mostly self-made] newcomers," many of them Jewish bankers and merchants.⁸³ And Hammack, who has written perhaps the best analysis of the changing political structure of New York in the late nineteenth century, stresses the multiplicity of competing elites in the city by the end of the century, which opened the path to greater democratization and influence for groups other than the rich or the corrupt:

[By] the late nineteenth century the metropolitan region's power was strongly concentrated in the hands of *competing* economic and social elites . . . so numerous, and so frequently in conflict with one another, that other groups, less wealthy but well organized, were also able to exert significant influence on their own behalf. The political party organizations were the most notable of these less wealthy groups, but on occasion others—including neighborhood economic associations, the Catholic Church, organized Jews and Protestants, and even organized labor and school teachers—were able to gain their own ends or at least to defend their own interests. . . . *Competition among the very wealthy at the end of the nineteenth century may very well have opened the way to a wider distribution of power among well organized though individually less wealthy pressure groups in the twentieth century.*⁸⁴



Map 4.4. The nucleus of a "second ghetto" in Brooklyn, 1930. Source: Harold X. Connolly, *A Ghetto Grows in Brooklyn*; reprinted with permission from New York University Press.

This view is shared by Teaford, who documents the remarkable capacity of governments to function in late-nineteenth-century American cities, despite their incredibly rapid growth; heightened social, ethnic, and class divisions; and the constraints on finances imposed by state governments. He chronicles the amazing accomplishments of American cities in the late nineteenth century in providing a high standard of public services such as water and sewerage systems, parks, libraries, schools, fire and police protection, street paving, bridges and tunnels, and transportation systems and demonstrates with comparative data how much better American cities were at these functions than were their European (mostly German and English) counterparts.

Teaford explores the complex system of governance that was worked out in American cities in the 1870–1900 period; he traces the evolution (and deal making) from the elite aldermanic rule that prevailed before the great migrations, to a more powerful city council, elected by ward/district, to represent neighborhoods and ethnically diverse interests when suffrage was extended, to a period of "reform" in which the roles of the mayor, his executive officers, and special commissions were strengthened and technically skilled professionals came to dominate.⁸⁵

To understand how this transition played out in New York, one must go back to the 1870s, when Boss Tweed was unseated in disgrace. The revenue-raising powers of New York's municipal government had made possible enormous improvements in the city, including the provision of a complex water system and the construction of fabulous Central Park, but had also facilitated the growth of an equally bloated system of patronage and a perilously mounting city debt.⁸⁶ When the depression of 1873 struck, the city almost went bankrupt, opening the way to drastic "reform." The state legislature responded to the crisis by creating the Board of Estimate and Appropriations, which restricted the powers of the Board of Aldermen (the city council) over budgets, bond raising, and vis-à-vis the executive branch.⁸⁷ The new charter gave the mayor power to appoint department heads and members of various commissions, which reduced the patronage available to ward bosses.⁸⁸ This permitted a higher level of professionalization in municipal services.⁸⁹

During the Progressive Era, both of these trends became evident. Civil service laws were passed in the 1880s and 1890s, and substantial powers were transferred to executives of various city departments and special commissions whose tenures in office often outlasted those of elected officials.⁹⁰ And because of the expanding functions taken on by the city government (public works, water supplies and sewers, libraries and schools, parks, and public health and safety, and so on), there was greater dependence upon experts such as civil engineers, landscape architects, librarians, schoolteachers, physicians, firemen, and policemen.⁹¹ Paradoxically, it also increased the power of the economic elites to pursue their agenda to create a city conducive to the smooth operation of business and commerce. As Hammack has pointed out, "during what can be called the Era of the Swallowtails, 1872–1886 [e.g., after Tweed was thrown out], every man elected Mayor of New York City was a prominent merchant who owed his nomination to the most important politically active groups of Democrats among the merchants, bankers, and lawyers who directed the city's economy."⁹²

But even between 1886 and 1903, which Hammack defines as the transitional era between domination by merchants and the Tammany-managed city of the first

third of the twentieth century, business interests continued to guide policy, relatively independent of the formal governmental structure of the city. Their opportunities may have been strengthened by the fragmentation of the Democratic Party into three competing components during the 1870s and 1880s: the dignified "reformers" (called "swallowtails," after the formal morning coats they favored), Tammany Hall, and the latter's breakaway faction, housed around the corner in Irving Hall. In any event, as Teaford puts it:

In the last twenty years of the century . . . the distinction between commerce and civic improvement became increasingly blurred. . . . During the 1880s and 1890s New York's Chamber of Commerce entered the municipal fray as advocate of a wide variety of measures. In 1880, for example, the chamber joined the campaign for the consolidation of Brooklyn, New York City, and the surrounding suburban communities because the group perceived that metropolitan disunity was detrimental to municipal services and consequently unfavorable to local business. . . . and in 1895⁹³ New York's chamber even went so far as to take sides in the city's electoral struggle. The chamber resolved that its Committee on Municipal Reform, consisting of five millionaire businessmen, should join with other anti-Tammany forces in the city to . . . oppose the Democratic machine ticket.⁹⁴

Mostly, however, their focus was on improving municipal services, especially in the crucial area of transportation. The Chamber strongly backed plans for the subway and in 1894 actually drafted for the state legislature the bill that created a new self-perpetuating rapid-transit commission and authorized it to finance the subway by issuing city bonds. Therefore, although "municipal bonds funded the construction of New York City's subways, the Chamber of Commerce was actually in charge of the project."⁹⁵ In addition, the Chamber had been a force behind the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge and later, when that became overtaxed with traffic,⁹⁶ the Williamsburg Bridge, which was opened in 1903. Other bridges were being proposed. Later, the Chamber turned its attention to zoning and planning issues, which, in the twentieth century, took on new significance.

CITY AND REGIONAL PLANNING

The business elites in New York played leading roles in the origins of planning and zoning, as they did in Chicago and Los Angeles. The extent to which developments in Chicago and New York were interrelated from the 1890s on is testimony to the fact that the two cities were experiencing similar problems, and not only trying to learn from one another, but actually employing many of the same "professional consultants" who cross-pollinated, for good or evil, similar solutions. Some of these solutions were actually imported from European precedents, suggesting that New York and Chicago had indeed become "world cities." However, U.S. cities, unlike their European counterparts, were growing faster and absorbing high proportions of foreign immigrants. This not only intensified their problems but entangled two issues—confounding the assimilation of immigrants with removing the injuries of class.

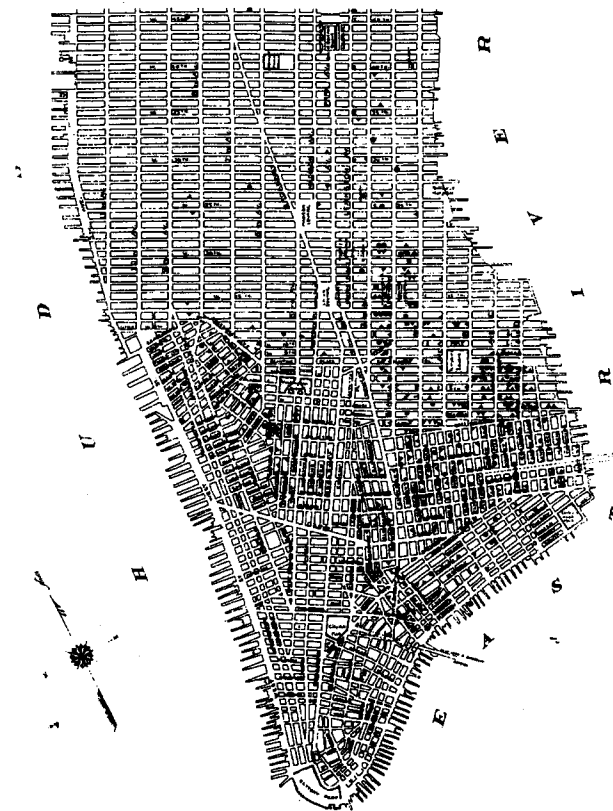
Housing

The relationship between immigrants and insalubrious overcrowded housing was acknowledged as a basic problem in both cities, in part because such immigrant zones were viewed as creating hardships for their residents and in part because bad housing was feared as a foyer of infection (in terms of both physical health and "social disorder") that could "infect" the healthier and wealthier quarters.⁹⁷ It is not an accident that immediately following the draft riots, a group of influential New Yorkers formed the Citizens' Association of New York, which undertook the first comprehensive survey of tenement housing in the city. The 1865 survey led to some municipal regulations over tenement construction, but enforcement was lacking and conditions continued to deteriorate. Exposés followed in the next decades, of which perhaps the most famous was muckraker Jacob Riis's photojournalist documentary *How the Other Half Lives*.⁹⁸

Finally, in 1900, in response to pressures from the Charity Organization Society (another elite organization), the New York Legislature appointed its fourth Tenement House Commission, with Robert De Forest as chair and Lawrence Veiller as secretary. The results of the commission's detailed studies were made available in a two-volume work by 1903,⁹⁹ but even before its publication, its humanitarian goals and the researchers' methods were being replicated in Chicago, at Jane Addams's behest, through Robert Hunter's parallel inquiry into Chicago's housing conditions.¹⁰⁰ The New York legislature also passed the Tenement House Act of 1901, which mandated the so-called new-law tenements for new construction, but these proved scant improvements over the older types.¹⁰¹ Ineffectual efforts at housing reform would continue throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, but it was not until the Depression of 1929 that New York initiated, even before federal involvement, its first public housing project. (See Chapter 7.)

Planning

Peter Hall, among others, has pointed out that in the United States from the beginning there was a strange divorce between housing amelioration and planning: "Early American planning . . . was dominated by the City Beautiful movement, and that was planning without social purpose—or even with a regressive one."¹⁰² And in this divorce, Chicago played an even more important role than New York. The City Beautiful movement is often traced back to the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, when the European tradition of beaux arts entered the United States with a vengeance,¹⁰³ but it must be emphasized that architect Daniel Burnham, the chief executive of the fair, hired Frederick Law Olmsted, the father of Central Park, to lay out the fairgrounds, and that commissions for most buildings were accorded to New York architectural firms, especially McKim, Mead & White—firms that were already established purveyors of that European style.¹⁰⁴ The influence of these architects on American building was already deeply entrenched in showy office buildings and homes for the wealthy, as Hall's account clearly demonstrates:



Map 4.5. The location of new-law tenements in lower Manhattan circa 1903.
Source: Portion of insert map in First Report of the Tenement House Department, circa 1903.

Between the 1870s and World War I, America's multimillionaires, particularly New York's robber barons, engaged in an orgy of competitive and conspicuous expenditure. Resplendent mansions and mausoleums and imposing skyscrapers symbolized their triumphs and established their credentials. . . . The foremost architect of the 1870s and '80s was Henry Hobson Richardson, a devotee of the Romanesque fashion. . . . His most famous followers were Charles Follen McKim, William Mead, and Stanford White. McKim and White were draftsmen for Richardson before going into partnership with Mead. In the 1880s and '90s the principals in the firm built Newport mansions and Manhattan townhouses for New York's premier capitalists . . . , planned the Pennsylvania Railroad station and

the Columbia University campus . . . [and] also created the Boston Public Library edifice. . . . Although most wealthy and well-known Chicagoans preferred local talent, noted eastern architects were also sought after. . . . White helped design the summer home of Cyrus H. McCormick, Richardson constructed the Field Wholesale Building . . . and Hunt built [Marshall] Field's residence. According to renowned Chicago architect Louis H. Sullivan, Burnham, the favorite builder for the town's elite, as superintendent of construction at the World's Fair, wanted to place all the exposition work with the eastern masters. . . . Burnham became a champion of classicism and left the planning of the fair to Hunt and McKim, Mead and White.¹⁰⁵

Thus the architecture of the fair and the planning of its grounds—which led directly to the Burnham-directed 1908 Plan of Chicago (sometimes referred to as the Plan of 1909, because it was not published until that year)—were not independent of New York influences; both infused New York ideas through their personnel.

I discuss the fair and the plan in more detail in the next chapter, but it is important to point out here that by the end of the nineteenth century one could no longer speak of independent developments in Chicago and New York, not only in technology and economic base, but in political mechanisms and aesthetic "superstructure." The two world cities were linked not only with one another but with European traditions and models from which, it must be confessed, they were highly derivative. And as we shall see in Chapter 6, these influences were also beginning to be felt in Los Angeles, as midwestern settlers carried the Chicago pattern to that city. By the turn of the century, one could truly speak of a common culture of architecture and city building.

But it would be a gross error simply to conflate planning developments in New York with those in Chicago. Although both were initiated by commercial and industrial elites who tended to ignore the needs of the masses in favor of themselves, New York plans were far less pretentious and more practical than those encompassed in the 1909 Chicago Plan. The analogue, New York's City Improvement Plan of 1907, focused more on such bread-and-butter issues as piers, bridges, and a regularization of streets.¹⁰⁶ And New York's "invention" of the zoning ordinance as a mechanism for planning was similarly concerned less with aesthetics than with the facilitation of commerce.

Zoning

In 1916, in response to growing congestion, New York passed the first citywide zoning law in the United States.¹⁰⁷ Its goal was to control densities, not only in the overcrowded tenement zones (which, because it never regulated existing structures and uses, it could not) but in the commercial districts, where the substitution of new skyscrapers for the lower buildings that had previously dominated was generating gridlock of wheeled and pedestrian traffic and, as we shall see, was threatening to "degrade" the social tone of "better" quarters.¹⁰⁸ The idea for comprehensive zoning was

in direct lineage from housing reforms, although it was to have a highly regressive effect on the poor.

In 1907, Benjamin C. Marsh, the executive secretary of the Commission on Congestion of Population in New York (which grew out of De Forest and Veiller's work on tenements), and Edward M. Bassett, another New York lawyer, visited Europe and were impressed by how German cities were regulating land uses and building heights through zoning. It was this "German model of combined land-use and height zoning that was imported to New York City in its 1916 zoning ordinance," and its "main agents were Bassett . . . and his fellow New York reform politician George McAneny."¹⁰⁹

But the reformers' proposals might not have been adopted had support not come from the business community, an unlikely source, and for reasons quite distinct from the concerns of tenement-house do-gooders.

Their moment of opportunity came in 1911, when Fifth Avenue garment retailers, worried by the spread of the manufacturing workshops that served them, formed a quasi-official commission to pressure the city. . . .

. . . The Fifth Avenue merchants were concerned that floods of immigrant garment workers on the noontime streets would destroy the exclusive character of their businesses and would thus threaten their property values.¹¹⁰

With the backing of commercial interests concerned with property values, the first zoning ordinance was enacted in New York City, from which the idea spread throughout the country, assisted by the promulgation of a standard state enabling act for zoning prepared in 1923 by professional planner/lawyers. This was supplemented by preparation of a standard planning enabling act, which many states adopted to foster master plans.

The legitimacy of using the police powers for zoning was contested in the courts, but was finally upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1926 in the case of *Village of Euclid, Ohio, et al. v. Ambler Realty Company*. As Hall has pointed out, the major defense employed by planner/lawyer Alfred Bettman, who presented the case, was that "the 'public welfare' served by zoning was the enhancement of the community's property values."¹¹¹

Zoning played an immediate and dramatic role in creating the special skyline of Manhattan—a skyline that Carol Willis has referred to as "ziggurat" and that many other scholars refer to as "wedding cake."¹¹² Both terms denote the successive setbacks that the zoning ordinance specified as structures increased in height. The same regulations that sought to segregate land uses also were designed to protect the air and light of adjacent buildings—that is, their rental values as offices. The perhaps unintended consequence of these regulations was to create a maximum "procrustean bed" for the design of skyscrapers: the so-called zoning envelope within which a tall commercial building was confined.

Prior to 1916, New York City had imposed no height or lot-coverage limits (except minimal ones for tenements).

In theory, a property owner could build straight up from the lot lines as far into the heavens as he or she desired, or as money allowed. After code approval of steel-

cage construction in 1889, office buildings regularly began to top sixteen or more stories. . . .

The passage in 1916 of New York's first zoning legislation changed the rules of the game for skyscraper design. In addition to regulating uses by districts . . . the law limited the height and bulk of tall buildings with a formula called the *zoning envelope*. Designed to protect some measure of light and air for Manhattan's canyons, it required that after a maximum vertical height above the sidewalk (usually 100 or 125 feet) a building must be stepped back as it rose in accordance with a fixed angle drawn from the center of the street. A tower of unlimited height was permitted over one-quarter of the site. The resulting "setback" or "wedding cake" massing, with or without a tower, became the characteristic form for the New York skyscraper from the 1920s through the 1950s.¹¹³

Given the typically small size of New York lots and the heavily built-up character of Manhattan, which made assembly of large sites virtually impossible, towers were a reasonable solution to the problem of providing sufficient light and air to offices that still lacked air conditioning and fluorescent lighting. And given the high land values of downtown and then midtown, it was economic to build structures to a height of sixty-three stories before diminishing returns set in. It was not until after 1950, when natural light and air were displaced by fluorescent lights and central air conditioning, that skyscrapers in cities throughout the United States became rather uniform, following the lines of international modern, and even using glass—without windows that open—in place of other facings. And it was not until 1960, when New York City drastically revised its zoning code, that the imperatives of ziggurat zoning were "repealed."¹¹⁴

From this discussion it is clear that the major motivation in regulating land uses and building heights was to enhance the economic value of property. Peter Hall concludes that "far from realizing greater social justice for the poor locked in the tenements of New York and Chicago, the planning and zoning system of the 1920s was designed precisely to keep them out of the desirable new suburbs that were being built along the streetcar tracks and the subway lines."¹¹⁵

Regional Planning

A similar motivation propelled the interest of the elites in regional planning. Recognizing that the forces of decentralization could not be stopped and that there was no hope of expanding the boundaries of a single jurisdiction over the vast regional complex that, even by the 1920s, encompassed some four hundred municipalities located within twenty-two counties that spread over three states, two models of regional planning were advanced: one by the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA), and an alternate scheme by the Regional Plan Association (the RPA of New York).¹¹⁶ Of the two, the former exercised maximum influence on the planning profession itself, whereas the latter, because it was promulgated by the economic and political

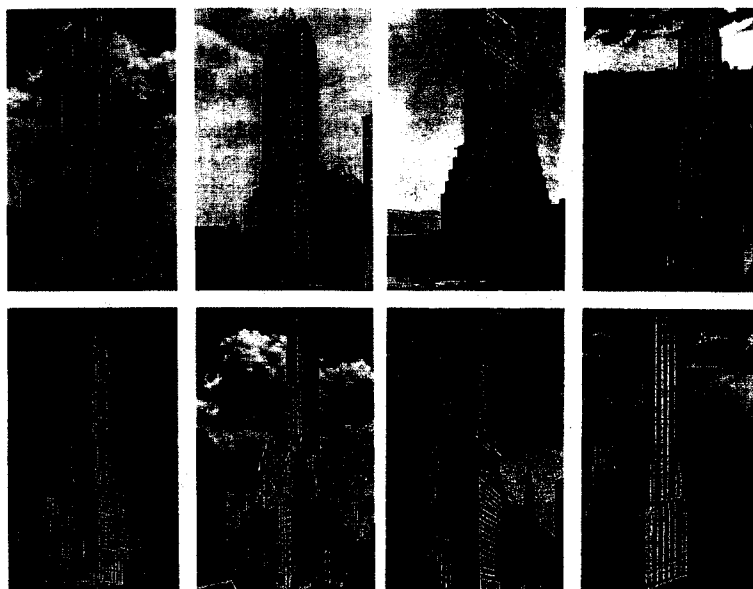


Figure 4.3. The search for light and air in New York's pre-Depression skyscrapers. Photographs are from the private collection of Carol Willis, which appeared in her book *Form Follows Finance: Skyscrapers and Skylines in New York and Chicago* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995). Reproduced with her permission.

power elite of New York, had more direct influence on practical action. I shall therefore concentrate on the origin and approach of the RPA.

A direct line of influence on the RPA can be traced from Chicago to New York in the person of Charles Dyer Norton, a top insurance executive who, after a brief stint in Washington as secretary of the treasury, moved to New York in 1911 as the vice president of the First National Bank and eventually became a trustee and the treasurer for the Russell Sage Foundation.¹¹⁷ Norton had been a former president of the Commercial Club of Chicago, which sponsored the Burnham plan, and had worked closely with Daniel Burnham. Almost immediately after arriving in New York, he "set about the business of preparing a similar document [for New York]. . . . Collaborating with Manhattan Borough President George McAneny, Norton helped establish a Committee on the City Plan (made up of the five borough presidents) in 1914."¹¹⁸ The scope, however, was recognized as woefully inadequate, given the extent to which the five boroughs were already being dwarfed by developments in the environs.

"What was to become *The Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs* had begun as no more than a gleam in Charles Norton's eye,"¹¹⁹ but with the support of the Russell Sage Foundation, it grew to a voluminous set of studies and some concrete

proposals (particularly with respect to transportation) that had a lasting, if not always positive, effect on the region. By 1921, Norton, by then treasurer of the Russell Sage Foundation, had convinced the foundation to sponsor the expansion of planning to the whole New York region through the newly organized Committee on the Plan of New York and Its Environs. Norton approached the British town planner Thomas Adams and asked him to conduct a survey and prepare a plan for a vast region:¹²⁰

Norton had called for a wide compass: "From the City Hall a circle must be swung which will include the Atlantic Highlands and Princeton; the lovely New Jersey hills back of Morristown and Tuxedo; the incomparable Hudson so far as Newburg; the Westchester lakes and ridges, as far as Bridgeport and beyond, and all of Long Island." The resulting area—over 5,000 square miles, with nearly 9 million people—was a far bigger canvas than any plan before had covered.¹²¹

A superb team of experts was assembled that by 1929 had published ten volumes of reports that dealt with the region's population trends, its economy, its housing, land use and zoning, and ideas for its future development. Although the scholarship was sound, the proposals were critiqued as both too visionary, given that there was no governmental unit capable of executing the plan, and too inadequate, because there was no end in sight for the process of decentralization.¹²² But despite such opposition, the "New York plan went ahead, through the medium of a Regional Plan Association under business elite leadership, and [the voluntary participation of] Planning Commissions for each area: it was particularly successful in its highway, bridge and tunnel proposals, mainly because that master-builder Robert Moses was in charge."¹²³

Transportation Planning under Robert Moses

The decentralization duly noted by the authors of the Regional Plan Association's studies was perhaps the most obvious trend of the 1920s, a phenomenon clearly linked to the explosive spread of motor vehicles of all kinds.¹²⁴ In the decade of the 1920s, when the proportion of residents in central cities of metropolitan areas grew by some 22.5 percent, the population in the suburban rings expanded by close to 35 percent.¹²⁵ The growing discrepancy between existing conditions and new needs generated by the automobile created two crises. First, downtown streets were becoming so overcrowded that in some cities (although not New York) "there was talk of barring cars from downtown streets."¹²⁶ The second problem related to the inadequacies of existing roads to connect city centers with their fast-growing peripheries. And in this crisis New York became a true innovator, thanks to ideas put forth by the Regional Plan Association surveys and the dynamic personality of Robert Moses, who found ways to get around existing political divisions within the New York metropolitan region to build the first highways.

Hall traces the precedent for Moses's schemes back to the parkways designed by Olmsted:

First used by Olmsted in his design for New York's Central Park in 1858, the parkway had been widely employed by landscape architects in the planning of parks and new residential areas. . . . But, beginning with William K. Vanderbilt's Long Island Motor Parkway (1906–11), which can claim to be the world's first limited-access motor highway, and the 16-mile Bronx River Parkway (1906–23), followed by the Hutchinson River Parkway of 1928 and the Saw Mill Parkway of 1929, this distinctively American innovation was rapidly adapted . . . [to give] rapid access from the congested central city both to new suburbs and to rural and coastal recreation areas.

The moving spirit was New York's . . . Robert Moses. Using a State Act of 1924, which he had personally drafted to give him unprecedented . . . powers to appropriate land, he proceeded to drive his parkways across the cherished estates of the Long Island millionaires . . . to give New Yorkers access to the ocean beaches.¹²⁷

In Chapter 7 I offer a fuller discussion of Moses's role in re-forming New York's parks and transportation system. Opinions are much divided on this controversial figure, who, by force of personality and somewhat devious brilliance in circumventing barriers to his exercise of almost dictatorial powers, almost single-handedly imposed his vision of transportation planning on the New York region. The effects of his achievements, however, are more commonly recognized. His plans eventually contributed to bifurcating the New York region into a largely proletarian city and a more privileged set of suburban communities by facilitating an "escape from New York." Furthermore, the mechanisms whereby Moses established his own independent financial "empire" through appropriating tolls on his highways and bridges undermined the city government's capacity to control its own planning process. Here I wish only to emphasize that by 1929, after which the Depression and then the Second World War interrupted such constructions, New York was the only city of the three that had supplemented its mass-transit system with freeways to reach its suburbs.¹²⁸

Substitutes for Metropolitan Government

Regional transportation planning, however, was not the only "invention" credited to New York in the 1920s. The city also experimented with sociopolitical inventions. Special authorities and districts were innovative mechanisms for imposing some (admittedly functionally fragmented) order on the conurbation that would always lack metropolitan government. Perhaps the most noteworthy of these was the Port of New York Authority, formed in 1921 and given special authority to bring "order" to the multiple port facilities.¹²⁹ But single-function "special districts" also proliferated, not only as a way of coordinating planning over areas larger than any one jurisdiction, but as a mechanism for bypassing state-set ceilings on city debt. These special districts could raise their own revenues by issuing tax-exempt bonds, and their operating costs could be added to local tax bills.

By the late 1950s, when the New York Metropolitan Region Study updated the

RPA studies of 1929, one of the volumes in that series focused on the 1,467 governmental and quasi-governmental units that were attempting to coordinate a region without an overarching governmental structure.¹³⁰ As author Robert Wood remarks, this was "one of the great unnatural wonders of the world: . . . a governmental arrangement perhaps more complicated than any other that mankind has yet contrived or allowed to happen."¹³¹ One can only agree, although perhaps the qualifier "perhaps" should be dropped.

Wood distinguishes two general "sectors": local units of government (cities, counties, boroughs, towns, and villages, as well as special-purpose districts for schools, fire, water, and so on) and translocal, metropoliswide giants that involve state and federal actors, of which the Port Authority of New York and the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority are singled out as examples, although the Croton Reservoir system was an even earlier prototype. Both sectors expanded enormously in the first three decades of the twentieth century. The burgeoning of public organizations took on new dimensions in the 1930s, but the institutional mechanisms for many of the New Deal programs were first "invented" in the juridical nightmare of the New York region. And as the stakes increased, the contentiousness of the struggle for power over public resources similarly intensified, presaging a continual tension between conflict and coordination outside the normal framework of local government.

One final New York innovation might be mentioned here, namely, the experiments with co-op ownership that became popular at the start of 1920 as a compromise between the (financial and psychic) benefits of home ownership, geared primarily to single-family homes or small walk-ups, and the necessities of larger apartment buildings in an increasingly dense city. New York pioneered in this form of ownership, which a generation later would become more and more widespread as rent controls made investments in rental complexes less attractive.¹³² Nevertheless, New York always remained a city of renters, which distinguishes it to this day from Chicago and even more from Los Angeles.

THE END OF AN ERA

The 1920s were the most optimistic era the United States had experienced. In New York, the researchers who conducted the RPA studies foresaw continued expansion into the periphery in planned suburbs that would incorporate Perry's ideas for neighborhood units. The real estate speculators foresaw equally expansive needs for center-city high-rises. It is ironic that, just as the city and country stood on the edge of the precipice that would hurl them into the chaos of the 1930s, some of New York City's most enduring monuments to capitalism would be built. The structures that still symbolize the economic and aesthetic might of the metropolis—the crown-topped Chrysler Building and the needle-topped Empire State Building—both date from the moment of the crash.¹³³