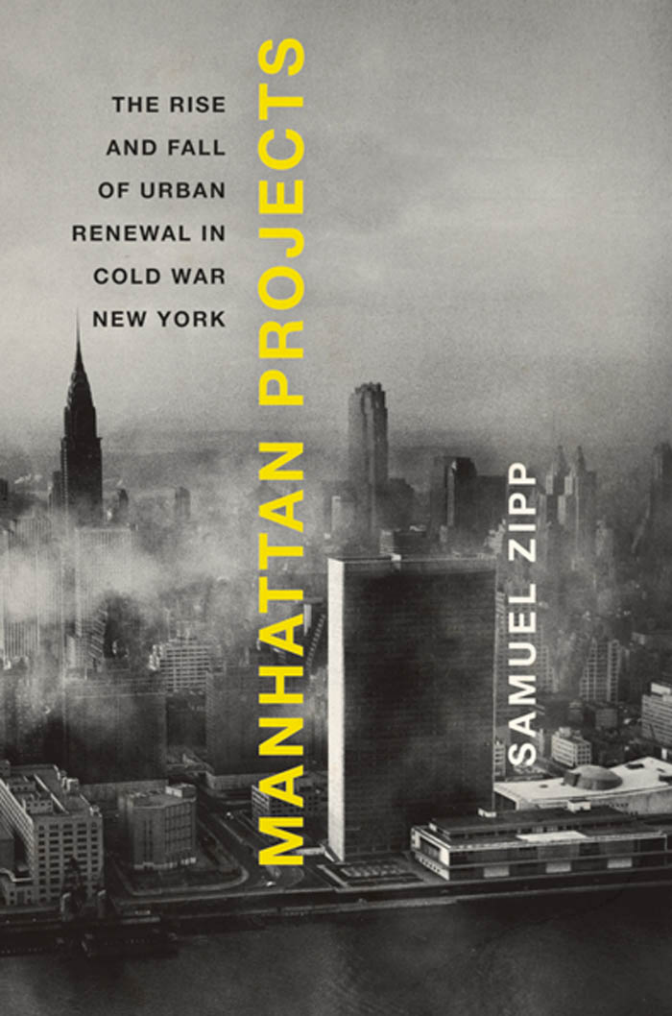


THE RISE
AND FALL
OF URBAN
RENEWAL IN
COLD WAR
NEW YORK

MANHATTAN PROJECTS

SAMUEL ZIPP



Manhattan Projects



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The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal
in Cold War New York **Samuel Zipp**



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To the memory of
HARRIET VERMILYA ZIPP,
city planner, librarian,
and mother.

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Manhattan Projects

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Introduction

Looking back on his arrival in New York, Claude Lévi-Strauss recalled the discovery of a fantastic metropolis. It was 1941, he remembered, and like so many Jewish migrants in those days, the anthropologist was escaping the terror of Nazi-occupied France. And like the generations that preceded him through the “golden door” of New York harbor, he greeted New York as a city “where anything seemed possible.” But most surprising and “enchanting” was the fact that Manhattan defied his expectations. New York was “not the ultra-modern metropolis” he had been given to expect. The city seemed not modern—not new at all, in fact—but archaic, a jumbled hodgepodge of the old-fashioned and the exotic sifted in with the contemporary.

In New York, the past seemed everywhere present. “Doorways” opened “in the wall of industrial civilization” onto “other worlds and other times.” In “the back rooms of second-hand shops” lurked sixteenth-century Tuscan sideboards; a wary dealer in “South American knickknacks” cautiously revealed a midtown courtyard shed “crammed with Mochica, Nazca and Chimu vases piled on shelves towering to the ceiling.” Everywhere, the city yielded classical European artifacts or the booty of colonialism that had once confirmed the Continent’s sway over the globe. New York appeared to Lévi-Strauss as a kind of frontier trading post, ready to “bear witness among us to the still real presence of a lost world.” European folklorists could find traditional tales, presumed long forgotten in the old country, being told “among their immigrant compatriots,” while Lévi-Strauss himself went to work everyday beneath the neoclassical arcades of the New York Public Library’s American room, only to find himself sitting near an original American: “an Indian in a feather headdress and a beaded buckskin jacket—who was taking notes with a Parker pen.”

To his eyes, the very streets and buildings of the city itself appeared “an immense horizontal and vertical disorder attributable to some spontaneous upheaval of the urban crust rather than to the deliberate plans of builders.” If some of the new “ultra-modern” towers of Wall Street and the Chrysler and Empire State buildings had been thrown up early in the 1930s, the building bust of the Depression had left them gleaming over a cityscape that was ever eroding and crumbling, revealing the past sedimented beneath a shroud of modernity. One could read the city’s built history in the “vacant lots, incongruous cottages, hovels, red-brick buildings”—the “still visible remnants” that emerged from the clamor and smoke “like witnesses to different eras.” Lévi-Strauss also discovered New York as an “agglomeration of villages,” a succession of ethnic enclaves in

which “one changed countries every few blocks.” Endowed with energetic cycles of newness, obsolescence, and decay, New York was a place where history and difference survived. It was open and available, a livable city. Away from the skyscrapers, “the web of the urban tissue was astonishingly slack.” New York was “a city where one could breathe easily.”

However, Lévi-Strauss delivered this rhapsody with the grim knowledge that the city was on the cusp of a remarkable transformation. “Naturally,” he writes—and we feel his chest tighten in grief even across the years—“all these relics were being assaulted by a mass culture that was about to crush and bury them.” Peruvian antiquities would give way to hi-fi sets and televisions; the courtyards of midtown would be razed and great steel and glass towers rise from the rubble. New Yorkers had long been forced to put up with the loss of their past, but previous remakings in their city’s churning history had happened building by building, lot by lot. The change Lévi-Strauss feared was something else altogether. Twenty years after he disembarked, New York would be seen by many as the capital of the world, an impression due in no small part to the fact that its physical landscape would be replaced block by block and neighborhood by neighborhood. Gone would be the old cottages and hovels as well as many of the tenements and stone and iron buildings once thought of as “skyscrapers.” In their place would rise rows of shining office towers, apartment buildings, hospitals, universities, and, most consequential for the livable, breathing city Lévi-Strauss remembered, spare, geometric forests of housing projects.

Lévi-Strauss recalled that, in 1941, his beloved red-brick buildings—warehouses, factories, armories, tenements—were “already empty shells slated for demolition.” This old city would fall victim to a many-faceted and pervasive program of slum clearance and urban renewal designed to clear decrepit building stock and remake the city along modern lines. City officials, aided by national legislation, subsidies, and funds, replaced the old buildings with what they understood to be modern, efficient “machines for living,” the inspiration and designs for which, ironically, were derived in part from the Europe Lévi-Strauss had left behind. Many New Yorkers—official, elite, and ordinary—felt that they lived in a city where one could *not* breathe, where light and air had no chance of reaching people sealed away in tightly packed tenements with narrow air shafts and dingy, weed-choked backyards. So, just as Lévi-Strauss’s Indian scholar took up his “Parker pen,” the builders took up their “deliberate plans”—the emblematic tools of an orderly modernity—and began to sweep away the old and bring forth the new.¹

This book is a cultural history of the urban transformations that Lévi-Strauss lamented, an account of Manhattan’s experience with urban renewal. Urban renewal was a vision for remaking the industrial cities of the North and Midwest

that flourished and fell in the 30 years after World War II. Proponents of urban renewal had a number of practical goals for what I call their “benevolent intervention” in the cityscape. They intended to use the powers of eminent domain (the legal doctrine that gives governments the right to take private property for public purposes), slum clearance, modern architecture, and rational city planning to sweep away the built environment of the nineteenth century and replace it with a new cityscape. They hoped to clear away “slums” and “blight,” rationalize traffic patterns, free city-dwellers from the environmental hazards of industry and the rigid lot and block configuration of the real estate market, bring middle-class shoppers and residents back to the central city in an age of suburbanization, and rehouse the urban poor in modern apartments with amenities and community facilities.

But in New York, Manhattan’s renewal boosters—led by Committee on Slum Clearance chair Robert Moses and a host of allies from the broad front of urban liberalism—also saw modern rebuilding projects as a way to make Manhattan a symbol of American power during an age of metropolitan transformation and the Cold War. Urban renewal, they believed, could deliver the proper cityscape of a world-class city, underwrite the city’s status as an icon of global power, and make it, quite literally, the capital of international modernity. A renewed Manhattan could project an image of modernization and prosperity to compete with the equally grandiose vision of progress simultaneously motivating the Soviet Union.

And yet, closer to home, these grand plans sparked no small amount of reaction to their overweening impositions on the lives of ordinary New Yorkers. The vigorous accumulation of doubts, critiques, reformulations, and resistance that greeted urban renewal were remarkable for the way they, too, engaged with the rhetoric of the Cold War. Ordinary New Yorkers argued about whether or not the effects of slum clearance and the new plazas and towers were evocative of freedom and democracy, the fabled American way that would vanquish Soviet Communism. While some made their peace with the new city spaces, others described urban renewal’s techniques and results as a top-down, mass replacement of an older, more historical, lived cityscape. They saw urban renewal’s spatial intervention as total and absolutist, its architecture regimented and alienating, and the displacement it required a travesty of democracy; its entire social and aesthetic profile seemed more suited to a totalitarian regime rather than to the United States. If proponents had envisioned urban renewal as a Cold War bulwark, shoring up the nation’s domestic readiness for John F. Kennedy’s “long twilight struggle,” those who had to live with its interventions increasingly saw it as a liability in that contest precisely because they came to associate it with their fears about the Cold War enemy. These objections to urban

renewal's ostensibly benevolent intervention eventually led to the remaking of urban renewal itself and the first inklings of a new brand of urbanism.

This history explores how the vision of urban renewal formed, how it was put into practice in remaking actual Manhattan places, and how it was undone by the experiences and critiques of those living in the places it left in its wake. In keeping with the Cold War context—in which battles were so often fought in the symbolic realm, with images and ideas as much as brute firepower or military maneuver—we must see that this transformation was cultural as much as political, a matter of meaning as much as movements. It was the result of a contest to win the right to determine what this new mode of city rebuilding meant. Was it development? Was it destruction? Or was it something in between, something more complex? Riffing on some lines from Willa Cather, the literary historian Carlo Rotella suggests that there is a “city of feeling” and a “city of fact.” Cities of fact, “material places assembled from brick and steel and stone, inhabited by people of flesh and blood,” inspire cities of feeling, but are also given shape and meaning by ideas and representations. Urban renewal projects and other like-minded attempts at city remaking on a grand scale are first imagined, designed, planned, and built. But then they are represented and used, and thus reimagined, and so, in a symbolic sense, rebuilt. Most important, the way they are reimagined gives impetus and shape to future efforts at designing, planning, and building, so that new cityscapes of fact can emerge from the old. If postwar cities were formed by explicitly political and social contestation—policy initiatives, struggles between political coalitions, electoral decisions, and street-level conflicts over racial and class boundaries—they were also subject to symbolic and imaginative struggle, attempts to give various cityscapes of feeling purchase in the actual cityscape of fact. These symbolic acts amounted to a fight for the right to give imaginative shape to the city—to describe the character and nature of urban life—and to make that conception natural or normal, the common-sense, shared understanding of that place. In the postwar years urban renewal became the object of just such a struggle, one that was waged with both facts and feelings, to determine the terms, methods, and principles by which cities would be remade. The social and political battles over urban renewal reveal a deeper disturbance in the realm of meaning, a contest to shape the “structure of feeling”—the arrangements of sentiment, allegiance, and belief—that could justify one mode of city shaping over another.²

If urban renewal itself rose and fell with the symbolic swells of the Cold War's domestic political culture, in the long run it played a crucial role in shaping the fate of postwar Manhattan. Urban renewal's fraught vision of how to rebuild Manhattan in an age of Cold War and modernity had a crucial hand in creating a divided cityscape. Ultimately, urban renewal reveals how New York, too, was

rising and falling: simultaneously climbing to become the political, cultural, and financial capital of the world and dropping deeper into what, by the mid-1960s, would be known as the “urban crisis.”

Of course, at the most basic level, urban renewal was a solution to physical and economic problems, a matter of urban politics and policy. Faced with the suburban flight of capital and people in the postwar era, city officials, as historian Jon Teaford has put it, tried to “beat suburbia at its own game.” Much municipal activity of the era was directed toward basic infrastructure upgrades—reducing air and water pollution or renovating sewer systems, for instance. But city officials also invested in great highway, slum clearance, and rebuilding projects designed to preserve the profitability of city property and to attract new private capital investment. Such new investment aimed to underwrite higher land values, increased tax revenues, new jobs, and overall prosperity and economic growth. For those officials, big projects and increased prosperity meant more votes on election day. Urban renewal was the latest technique by which city officials and their allies in downtown businesses, urban planning agencies, civic organizations, and neighborhood groups—the constituents of what are often called urban “growth coalitions”—cooperated to keep urban space profitable and their city competitive in regional and national markets.³

These policy initiatives had a social goal as well: highway and clearance projects sought to lure white, middle-class residents and shoppers—particularly women—back downtown. Many promoters of urban renewal were motivated by the fear that downtowns would become “Negro shopping districts.” As a campaign to bring order to the built environment, it is no surprise that urban renewal also sought to reinforce “orderly” relations between peoples. Influenced by modern planning theory, which prescribed specific and separate zones in the cityscape for disparate uses, urban renewal policies served to perpetuate inequitable patterns of race and gender and to preserve white middle- and upper-class power in central cities.⁴

Title I of the 1949 U.S. Housing Act mobilized the federal government’s growing capacity for the physical manipulation of cities. “Urban redevelopment” looked to subsidize local rebuilding campaigns. (It wasn’t until 1954 that revisions to the Housing Act introduced the term “urban renewal.”) Washington’s subsidies came in response to years of halting, largely unsuccessful efforts by city governments to clear slums and rebuild. Cities like New York had used New Deal funds to build some public housing during the 1930s, but it was difficult to attract private builders to risk capital on high-priced slum land close to the downtown core without significant government help. The 1949 act was the most successful of President Harry Truman’s domestic Fair Deal policies, providing federal subsidies for municipal purchases of built-up urban land acquired

through eminent domain and giving cities the financial leverage to prepare tracts of cleared land for either privately backed redevelopment or new public housing.⁵

And yet, urban renewal was more than a set of policies or economic transactions. It was a vision, a symbolic and cultural undertaking that both shaped and was shaped by urban policy. During the 20 years after World War II, “urban renewal” emerged as a highly contested phrase, one that grabbed the public’s imagination in a way that “redevelopment” never did. Across the United States and the globe, the term came to be understood, by both its proponents and its critics, as symbolic of the way that planning and architecture were remaking the daily lives of city-dwellers. It signified a new, emerging mode of city living, a controversial vision of how to see postwar cities in an age of modernity and Cold War. This was nowhere more true than in New York, where the intellectual, architectural, design, arts, and media communities had ample opportunity to reflect on the reshaping of the metropolis. As a center for the various international communications and cultural industries in the postwar years, New York—and Manhattan in particular—became both actor and stage in the great urban dramas of the age.⁶

If proponents of urban renewal pitched projects as cures for urban obsolescence and as symbols of a new city, other New Yorkers received them as fundamental and sometimes unwelcome reorderings of the experience of city life. Their complaints and critiques echoed Claude Lévi-Strauss’s lament for his lost city. A diverse cast of characters—planners and architects, city officials, businesspeople, bankers, tenant activists, social workers, housing reformers, journalists, photographers, filmmakers, artists, and residents of both the old industrial and tenement landscape and the new world of towers and superblocks—competed with one another to represent the experience of clearance or the new spaces ushered in by modern urban planning practices. As they shaped, depicted, and protested the new urban forms that renewal provided, they struggled to claim the power to describe the impact that urban renewal was having on the city.

On the one hand, “urban renewal” was shorthand for an entire ideal and practice of spatial transformation that employed characteristic aesthetic forms—modern architecture and superblock urban planning—to sweep away the nineteenth-century street grid. Shared and practiced by a broad coalition of interested parties in both the public and private sectors—including architects, planners, city and federal officials, businesspeople, bankers, housing reformers, social workers, union officials, and even tenant organizers—this vision propelled efforts to reclaim city life from housing deterioration, “irrational” industrial uses in residential districts, traffic congestion, and dangerous health conditions—a complex of problems summed up by the terms *slums* and *blight*.

If urban renewal was at root a practical, market-minded attempt to restore order and prosperity to cities, many of its proponents were also inspired and motivated by the more abstract sense that it was “modern.” Confident of its appeal to contemporary visions of progress and newness, urban renewal’s most idealistic supporters shared the assumption that it was modern in three senses: it advocated the economic modernization of cities, employed the arts and practices of aesthetic modernism, and stood for a new time and space of urban modernity. All three components pointed toward the creation of living and working spaces on a mass scale for an emerging mass society. This new built infrastructure of everyday life was to be, in and of itself, an emblem of that modern, mass society.

Public housing and urban renewal functioned as a kind of domestic counterpart to the modernization theory that liberal American planners and social scientists recommended for nations emerging from colonialism. Faith in economic growth through technological proficiency, administrative efficiency, and government spending would usher developing nations into modernity and affluence; urban renewal offered a similar program for what Congressman Byron Rogers called “the underdeveloped areas at home.” Also appealing was urban renewal’s aesthetic affiliation with modernism in the arts, its resemblance to a three-dimensional form of modern art. The design idioms of modern architecture and superblock planning were nothing if not forward-looking. They treated traditional city forms like modern painting did the conventions of figure, line, and depth. Slum clearance scoured away the old cityscape and its traditional, sedimented urban patterns. Then, the clean, progressive rationality of the towers and plazas rose over the ruins. City blocks were literally uprooted, broken down, and reconstructed in geometric arrangements that produced a new, unfamiliar sense of order and a remade experience of urban space. Urban renewal’s modernism was one propelled by the spirit of “creative destruction” that Joseph Schumpeter and Karl Marx found at the heart of capitalism and the modern age. This faith in the creative powers of destruction was at root an embrace of modernity, of the necessity and promise of living in an age of progress and newness. Proponents of urban renewal assumed that its built environment—its cleared, open superblocks and austere towers—was a self-evident symbol of a new kind of time and space. These built forms stood for the very idea that it was necessary and possible to do away with the old city, for the faith that tradition had to be displaced, for the belief that city building had to reveal time rolling ever forward, leaving outmoded ways of life behind.⁷

Supporters of renewal turned their lofty beliefs toward grand goals. The chaos of progress and newness could be harnessed, they believed, in a rational effort to plan for the future of cities. According to planning theory, modern architecture

and superblock urban planning provided the necessary and proper forms for the orderly and healthy development of cities threatened by poverty, decay, war, urban migration, and overcrowding. Designed as responses to the need to think beyond building only for individuals and single families, they would remake postwar cities for an emerging mass society by bringing industrial standardization and functionalist architecture to the building industry. Over the course of the postwar era, modern towers and open, park-like plazas came to represent a new approach to city life that was emerging worldwide. Their shapes and images stood for what it meant to live in the time of the all-conquering now, when past urban worlds were being relentlessly churned up, readying the old soil of the city for new built forms.⁸

Of course, these grand ambitions floated high above the lived reality of the city. It was not long before urban renewal also came to be seen as a force for turning working-class neighborhoods over to private developers, destroying neighborhoods, dislocating people, and implanting a foreign, imposed landscape. Clearance site evacuees, cast out by the destructive energies of progress, were said to resemble the displaced persons of postwar Europe. To many of the people caught in its path, urban renewal earned the popular sobriquet “Negro removal,” because it continually targeted poor African American and Puerto Rican enclaves for destruction. For them, it was simple expropriation, another instance in which public authority combined with private wealth to uproot people with little power from land with much potential value, not unlike American Indian removal or other cases of historic racial displacement. With its open plazas and modern towers erected over the ruins of old neighborhoods, urban renewal appeared as a vast apparatus for replacing the horizontal relations of neighborhoods with the vertical authority of “projects.” For some, the new modern spaces of urban renewal marked the arrival of the dark side of mass society, bringing with it all the anomie and isolation that term seemed to threaten.

Although resistance to renewal is most often identified with the writer Jane Jacobs and her 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, a closer look at the story of urban renewal reveals that dissent was actually present all along. Currents of critique and unrest surfaced in urban renewal’s infancy and matured alongside it, developing out of the same liberal and left coalition backing renewal itself. From the moment that privately backed urban renewal debuted at Stuyvesant Town in 1943, a relative handful of doubters—dissident liberal housing experts, tenant movement radicals, crusading lawyers, unorthodox planners and architects, social workers working in the new public housing—began to gradually and haltingly separate themselves from modernist orthodoxy. Urban renewal, they argued, uprooted stable neighborhoods, fed the creation of new slums, perpetuated deindustrialization, and redoubled racial segregation.

Here were the first glimmerings of a new kind of urban vision, one drawn from the intricate social connections fostered by old city neighborhoods rather than from the principles of modern planning practice. Here was an insurgent urbanism from below based on the street, stoop, and sidewalk instead of the superblock, tower, and plaza. Jacobs and other supporters of what would come to be called *advocacy planning* drew upon, extended, and refined these critiques, forging a movement to end urban renewal. Over some 25 years, this resistance unmade Robert Moses's liberal coalition around renewal, while simultaneously unmaking urban renewal itself as the dominant conception of urban building and rebuilding.⁹

One must be careful to specify how these struggles matter. Urban renewal's failures should not be ascribed solely to the impact of modern architecture and planning. The greatest troubles for public housing resulted from declining maintenance budgets, incompetent management, deepening racial segregation, and the overwhelming influx of dislocated tenants from renewal, highway, and other clearance projects.¹⁰ But people caught in the turmoil of urban renewal reacted to the character of the new cityscape; they delivered judgments on the forms of urban renewal's city-rebuilding efforts as well as its effects. So while urban renewal's vast ambitions were not inherently productive of the social chaos charged to its account, its all-or-nothing city-rebuilding strategies and austere, utopian design visions did set the stage for its fall. "Benevolent intervention" in the cityscape had unforeseen consequences. They arrived in the form of struggles over what that intervention meant. People did learn to adapt to these new spaces and transform them for their own ends (particularly in middle-income projects where the social problems of public housing were rarer), but it was the imaginative struggle with the spatial transformation wrought by new projects and resistance to clearance that undid urban renewal. As a vision of city remaking, urban renewal rose and fell on the terms in which it was originally conceived. People who lived with its remade world went on to turn its lofty vision inside out.

To understand that movement requires moving beyond some convenient fictions. The story of urban renewal has often been loosely described via a familiar dichotomy. The "planners" versus the "walkers," the "view from the tower" versus the "view from the ground," even "Moses" versus "Jacobs"—all these oppositions capture in concepts what was actually a historical process. On the one hand were the planners, the removed apostles of what James Scott calls "authoritarian high modernism," who descended from on high to wipe away history, street life, and the day-to-day patterns of working-class neighborhood life in the interests of administrative order. On the other were the walkers, whose peregrinations represented an entirely different city, a reservoir of affiliations and attachments

that the view from on high surveyed and even controlled, but did not understand. These oft-repeated metaphorical figures describe accurate tendencies, but employed in accounts of actual events they become static placeholders rather than active navigators reacting to events in the flow of time. They are fixed and frozen outside of history.¹¹

What if, instead, we put the planners and walkers back into the flow of history? Their struggle was never as simple as the dichotomy presupposes. Over time, former advocates of renewal joined the resistance, critics looked for reform rather than abolition of renewal, some resisters made their peace with clearance if it meant new housing, and some residents embraced or accommodated themselves to modernist spaces. In the long run, the vision of urban renewal was not simply undone; Manhattan also absorbed its urban interventions and made them a part of its cityscape.

The reformist vision that Jacobs and other '60s era activists would make the new commonsense lingua franca of post-renewal urbanism was not something entirely apart from the city-remaking principles it displaced. Jacobs's critique emerged directly from close, lived experience with the top-down vision of Cold War era urban renewal and its ideal scenarios for the built environment of a mass society. The rise and fall of urban renewal was part of a glacial shift within the broad front of post-World War II urban liberalism as it confronted the domestic political culture of the Cold War. The story told here reveals not only urban renewal's transformation, but also the transformation of New York itself as it simultaneously underwent both a fall into urban crisis and a rise to world city status.

Urban renewal and its characteristic instrumental forms—modernist architecture and superblock planning—were the product of a half-century's worth of efforts by housing reformers and modern planners to improve urban life. Their most immediate sources were the movement for modern housing and the drive for slum clearance, two campaigns born in the great cities of Europe and North America and raised through a process of transatlantic intellectual exchange over the course of the first four decades of the twentieth century. A wide range of housing reformers, social workers, urban businesspeople, crusading politicians, journalists, intellectuals, and urban professionals of various stripes, particularly architects and city planners, founded these two movements and made them into a widespread ethos of urban reform.

Housing reformers like Jacob Riis, Lawrence Veiller, Edith Elmer Wood, and Mary Simkhovitch came to the ideal of slum clearance through several decades' worth of campaigns against the "tenement evil." Inspired by the belief that the deteriorating urban environment was at the root of poverty, family instability, crime, and other social problems, they provided the intellectual arguments for

an uneasy alliance of tenement reformers, city politicians, urban planners, and businesspeople with interests in downtown property values. This group had divergent goals—the reformers wanted to improve working-class housing conditions, alleviate the social problems caused by “slums,” and encourage the poor to be better citizens; the city politicians wanted to clear slums by whatever means possible; the planners hoped to launch balanced programs of comprehensive land use planning by both private and public forces; and the business interests wanted to get rid of economic “blight” and free up urban land for profitable development—but they all gradually converged around the tactic of slum clearance as a way to ease the problems of the inner city. Over the first few decades of the twentieth century, they moved from trying to reform and enforce building codes and zoning rules to envisioning the wholesale destruction of tenement districts and the creation of new neighborhoods for the poor.

Modern housing, on the other hand, was a particularly European-inspired vision of how to remake cities and the entire social shape of shelter. Its advocates—housing reformers, architects, planners, and other left-leaning urbanists—offered



I.1. Design for Living? This image of children playing around a smoldering pile of rags in a tenement yard opened housing reformer Edith Elmer Wood's pamphlet on slum conditions across the country. The caption captured the spirit of more than a half-century of reformist zeal and suggested both the threats to conventional domestic life posed by unchecked urban real estate speculation and the readiness of reformers to supply a more healthful, family-friendly design for living through slum clearance and modern housing construction. From Wood, *Slums and Blighted Areas in the United States* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1935), frontispiece.

new, avant-garde forms of architecture and city planning for a new mass society. Inspired by European modernists like Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Ludwig Hilberseimer, and Ernst May, their designs featured low (and later, high-rise) multi-family modernist dwellings with ample communal amenities sited in open green space. Envisioning the built environment as the fundamental interface between humanity and nature, the “housers” promised to use building as a way to bring the two into balance and order after decades of chaotic urban development. They saw the territory of modern housing’s operations as potentially limitless, unbounded by the constraints of geography, tradition, or national borders. If advocates of slum clearance offered a practical, high-handed, even ruthless distaste for the slums born of middle-class Victorian values, modern housing’s partisans contributed a progressive and idealistic but no less overweening appeal to reforming the lives of the poor. The alliance between the two laid the groundwork for a set of philosophies, practices, and principles that we can call the “ethic of city rebuilding.”¹²

Advocates of modern housing and slum clearance had linked aspirations. However, they were often at odds over how to achieve the ordered metropolis. The thinkers behind the modern housing movement—particularly its chief advocate, Catherine Bauer—were often leery of slum clearance. They abhorred the idea of paying slumlords’ trumped-up prices for cleared land, and they worried that the city planners and businesspeople who favored clearance would work—as they did—to turn land over to private development rather than create low-income housing. Many of them felt that the only way to get vast amounts of new housing built cheaply—as well as in an environment befitting proper moral and community life—was to create new developments on the outskirts of the existing city. But a significant portion of modern housing’s advocates eventually did come to back the slum clearance ideal, if only because of public pressure to do something about the age-old scourge of slums.

The Depression and World War II, with their weighty combinations of privation, suffering, and expectation, brought a mounting sense of urgency to the cause and gave impetus to a process of intellectual compromise and political opportunism. After 1937, when the New Deal committed significant funds to public housing, housing reformers could finally clear and build on densely packed land at the heart of the city. They paired government subsidies for clearance with an adaptive and practical approach to the aesthetic and social visions of modern housing. The merger between the slum clearance and modern housing traditions emerged most palpably in New York, under the auspices of the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), where planners and housers worked together to meld modernism in housing and planning with the power of government-backed slum clearance. Architecturally, NYCHA mar-

ried modern functionalism and American garden apartment traditions to pioneer its own brand of cruciform-shaped, red-brick-clad modern towers. Most important, NYCHA brought into wide usage a planning innovation crucial to the elaboration of urban renewal: the “superblock.” Both European and American reformers agreed that, in order to be successful, city rebuilding had to launch a sizable intervention in the old city fabric. New housing, they believed, had to arrive in such quantity that it would not be overwhelmed by the old tenement district; it had to form the basis for what planners and housers called a self-contained “neighborhood unit”—an urban intervention big enough to survive, but small enough to nurture community life. By taking large tracts through eminent domain, closing streets, and putting up modern, tower-block housing on cleared green space, new superblock housing projects would ensure their own economic survival, offer the ideal environment for proper family and community life, disrupt the old speculative street grid, and return light, air, and open space to city-dwellers. NYCHA built a handful of these projects before the war. The early projects were walk-ups of 4 stories, but increasingly NYCHA built taller towers to bring light and air to more people. In 1941, a few months before Pearl Harbor, NYCHA built East River Houses in East Harlem, with 6-, 10-, and 11-story towers that provided a blueprint for the physical shape of a new urban world.

Advocates of slum clearance and modern housing may have found a measure of common ground, but they could not have knocked down any tenements or built any new projects without World War II. The war brought slum clearance and most housing construction to an abrupt halt, but provided time and inspiration in their place. The war’s vast scale, with its mass mobilization of industry and population, required unprecedented planning at all levels of society. The devastation of European cities left cleared ground for rebuilding, inspiring hope that a new urban world could emerge from the charred remains. In the United States, untouched by bombing, hope sprang from expected postwar affluence, modernization, and economic growth, forces that could sweep away old city forms just as effectively—and, it would later be revealed, nearly as ruthlessly—as bombing. City planners, architects, housing experts, and government officials used the war years to lay plans for a broad-based campaign of urban redevelopment. Guided by visions of modern housing and its urban innovations, they foresaw a widely expanded campaign of urban rebuilding. New Deal economist and housing policy expert Leon Keyserling offered a comprehensive vision for what he called “cities in modern dress,” a strategy to rehouse the poor, stabilize the dwindling middle class, and restore order to the cityscape with modern city-planning principles. Rebuilding, he said, should be undertaken “in accord with a master city plan” and “should include the assembly and clearance of slums



I.2. East River Houses, New York City Housing Authority, 1941. East River was NYCHA's first true tower-in-the-park project. This government photo gives a glimpse of the world that the project displaced in the right foreground. Public Works Administration and U.S. Housing Authority Collection, National Archives and Records Administration, photo no. NWDNS-196-HA-NY-05-05-S2664.

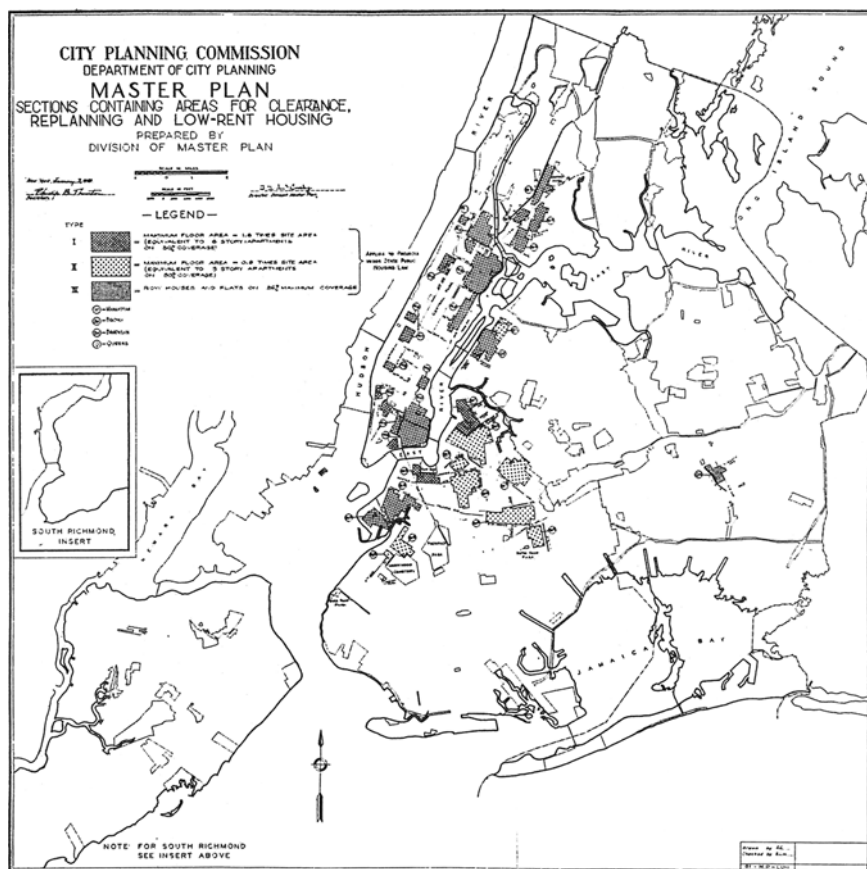
and blighted areas, and their rebuilding for a variety of purposes—including privately financed housing for upper income and middle income groups, public housing for families of low income, commercial projects, recreational facilities, parks and playgrounds.” This was the city-rebuilding ethic in full flower and the set of principles that would serve as the early ideological armature of New York’s campaign to remake itself as a metropolis fit for the title of capital of the world.¹³

In 1940, New York’s City Planning Commission produced a plan for putting these principles to work. As part of its master planning process, the commission drew up a map for postwar rebuilding of “appropriately located obsolescent areas.” This map identified areas suitable for “clearance” and “replanning” and called for their use for “low rent housing.” Like Keyserling, the commissioners suggested in their accompanying report that, “in some of these districts, very high rent housing would not be inappropriate.” Thus, “the sections shown on

the map will not and should not be rebuilt exclusively with subsidized low rent projects. They will logically include housing developments for many different income groups.” On the one hand, this was a progressive vision of a renewed city for all: “The City can become a place of light and beauty and hope that all would be proud to have fostered—a city without slums, where the only difference between the houses of the very rich and the very poor would be the number and size and furnishing of the rooms they live in.” On the other, it did not offer low-income public housing pride of place; redevelopment by private capital was equally if not more important. As it happened, the Board of Estimate never formally ratified the plan; Robert Moses, suspicious of the ideological goals behind master planning, made sure that the plan was never officially adopted. Still, the map retained a kind of unofficial power, and even Moses used it to legitimate both public and private projects that he negotiated with NYCHA and individual renewal sponsors. The CPC replanning scheme provided a glimpse of what the city-rebuilding ethic might accomplish, but its poor political fortunes foreshadowed how that ethic would be transformed into the policy of urban renewal in the early years of the Cold War.¹⁴

Manhattan Projects begins in the period during and just after World War II, when the struggle to define urban renewal began in earnest. It continues through the two decades after the war—when the debates over clearance, dislocation, and the character of the new modern spaces were fully joined—and comes to a close in the late 1960s. By then, urban renewal had remade significant chunks of Manhattan, but had also been discredited and largely undone as both policy and vision. The main characters in this story are four iconic Manhattan projects, each a prime example of the efforts by liberals in the public and private sphere to save the city from slums and blight and to assure Manhattan’s image as a center of global influence: the UN headquarters complex, Metropolitan Life’s housing development Stuyvesant Town, the Lincoln Square urban renewal plan that gave New York the Lincoln Center performing arts complex, and the vast belts of public housing that the New York City Housing Authority erected in East Harlem. Analyses of the physical and cultural construction of each place are paired with accounts of how the projects were received, the better to reveal how those who experienced the tumultuous interventions of renewal elaborated various responses—from accommodation and negotiation to critique and resistance—to the arrival of the bulldozers, plazas, and towers.

If the years before World War II saw the elaboration of an ambitious ethic of city rebuilding, aspirations for urban reconstruction acquired their most trenchant symbol in the years immediately after the war, when the United Nations buildings went up on the East Side of Manhattan. The UN headquarters was not a true urban renewal project. John D. Rockefeller bought a few acres of



I.3. New York's vision for postwar slum clearance and new housing construction designated areas of slums and blight around the city's historic core, but it left open what sort of new uses would take over the land. The plan, never formally ratified, became a flexible, easily modified guide to renewal for Robert Moses after the war. City Planning Commission of New York City, Department of City Planning, Master Plan: Sections Containing Areas for Clearance, Replanning and Low-Rent Housing, January 3, 1940. Used with permission of the New York City Department of City Planning. All rights reserved.

slaughterhouses along the East River from real estate mogul William Zeckendorf and made a gift of them to the United Nations. Robert Moses arranged the necessary permits and rights-of-way, but no federal or state monies provided for its construction. But the fact that a few acres of slaughterhouses were transformed into one of the central icons of the postwar world had great significance for the era of rebuilding to come.

With the war over and the United States victorious, relatively unscathed, and ready to assume the mantle of global leadership, many elite observers and civic

leaders predicted that New York was poised to become the political and cultural capital of the world. But in order for the city to leap into the first rank of what would later be called “global cities,” they believed that the metropolis needed to undertake a grand scheme of city remaking, one that was symbolic and imaginative as well as physical. The city-rebuilding ethic was harnessed to this greater vision of urban myth making. It would function as the infrastructural nuts and bolts of an imaginative project that required the actual rebuilding, in concrete, glass, brick, and steel, of an outmoded cityscape along modern lines. With their modern design, the UN buildings offered not only a new architectural ideal for great buildings, but an entire program of city remaking that placed the visions offered by slum clearance and modern housing front and center. These urban rebuilding techniques, the United Nations demonstrated, were the key to restructuring the entire city in the United Nations’ image: a city of towers and open space, free of the smoke and soot of industry and the hampering confinement of nineteenth-century blocks and lots. In the United Nations’ progressive design and its campaign for world peace lay a new vision of global and urban harmony, one that was dependent on the principles of order offered by the city-rebuilding ethic.

Meanwhile, just 20 blocks south of the UN site, the city-rebuilding ethic was in the process of being transformed. Stuyvesant Town was a city- and state-financed “blueprint” for the federal policy of urban redevelopment launched by the 1949 Housing Act. In putting together the deal, Robert Moses and Metropolitan Life head Frederick Ecker collaborated on a new public/private mechanism for renewal, which drew on the aesthetic forms of the city-rebuilding ethic but rewrote its social ambitions to support their primary goals of clearing slums and shoring up middle-class life in the central city. The company offered Stuyvesant Town as a public good, but controlled it as private space. As such, Stuyvesant Town was a model for not only the policy, but also the culture of post-1949 urban renewal.

Met Life’s “suburb in the city” was a modernist-inspired, whites-only housing reserve at the northern end of the Lower East Side. Opponents, led by Harlem civil rights groups and dissident liberals like Stanley Isaacs and Charles Abrams, called it a “walled city” for the white middle class. Residents, meanwhile, had to figure out how to live in its novel kind of urban space. Left-wing tenants affiliated with the American Labor Party worked to desegregate the complex from the inside, while others concentrated on fulfilling the promise of its marketing as a suburb in the city. They laid claim to the new postwar family-centered, middle-class ideal. They hoped to build that vision in the city, but struggled with the contradictions that Met Life’s authority and the project’s mass form posed. The conflicts at the heart of Stuyvesant Town life, conflicts between the freedom

and hope that rebuilding brought and the sense of authority and regimentation that the new spaces of renewal seemed to inspire, would echo throughout the history of urban renewal.

Stuyvesant Town demonstrated that, if urban renewal began as a set of ideas offered by housing reformers and advocates of slum clearance, the latter eventually got the upper hand. It showed how housing reform efforts were appropriated by city planners and downtown real estate and business interests and then codified in a policy—the Housing Act of 1949—that employed federal subsidies to destroy slums, revitalize central business districts, and bring the middle class back downtown. Met Life’s alliance with Robert Moses was the first in a long line of local, liberal, urban growth coalitions that later backed and implemented federal policies. These coalitions embraced the idea of slum clearance, seeing renewal first and foremost as a tool to preserve the profitability of urban land. The campaign to create livable, publicly funded communities for low-income urbanites survived, but as an afterthought. As policy, urban renewal became an attempt to prop up property values, stave off downtown decline, and attract white middle-class people back to cities that were becoming poorer and darker-skinned in an age of urban migration, deindustrialization, and suburbanization.¹⁵

This denouement was not ushered in all at once with the 1949 Housing Act; the political maneuvering over the fate of the city-rebuilding ethic had started years before and its effects only gradually became apparent thereafter, playing out in a series of Cold War–inflected compromises and struggles over the shape and vision of particular projects. By 1949, the campaign for slum clearance and modern housing had made its social and cultural vision the dominant intellectual and practical approach to city rebuilding. The result of political compromise and struggle, however, was a practical, money-minded urban renewal policy for the middle classes and downtown business districts carried out with the forms, aesthetics, and rhetoric of utopian modernism in planning and architecture.

Lincoln Square was the height of Robert Moses’s urban renewal efforts in Manhattan. The project cleared 48 acres of the urban grid for luxury slab-block tower housing, facilities for the Red Cross and Fordham University, and its much-heralded centerpiece, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. It expressed the highest ambitions of Manhattan’s urban renewal vision, trading blocks and blocks of tenements, warehouses, factories, and storefronts for a world-class, modern performing arts complex that capped New York’s campaign to become the cultural capital of the world. Lincoln Center’s backers, like chair John D. Rockefeller III, hoped it would provide the nation with an image of cultural maturity and urban resurgence that could be brandished in the Cold War with the Soviet Union. At the same time, the project revealed the fault lines

at the heart of urban renewal. The organized resistance to relocation at Lincoln Square, which rallied around liberal lawyer Harris Present, brought growing discontent with Robert Moses's all-or-nothing bulldozer clearance practice of urban renewal—until then led mainly by left-wing tenant radicals—to the attention of a citywide audience. The resistance furthered the critique begun by the opponents of Stuyvesant Town, showing how urban renewal fostered divisions along lines of class and race, uprooted stable neighborhoods, perpetuated racial segregation and deindustrialization, and fed the creation of new slums. Perhaps most important, the resistance revealed a vision of urban culture that was diametrically opposed to that on offer at Lincoln Center; instead of a new modern cityscape for a world city delivered from on high, the residents and businesspeople of Lincoln Square defended the complex social world of their old neighborhood.

Urban renewal rose and fell in tandem with public housing. Between 1941 and 1961, the New York City Housing Authority put up 10 percent of all the public housing built in New York City in East Harlem. Cold War–inflected conflict in the U.S. Congress ensured that the 1949 Housing Act left public housing a poor stepchild to urban redevelopment, with its social vision straitened and its numbers depleted. And yet, in East Harlem and elsewhere in the city, NYCHA clung tenaciously to the ideals of the city rebuilding ethic, trying to put up as much housing possible for as many people as possible.

The authority succeeded in transforming East Harlem, but the results were not universally welcomed. Some appreciated the new, clean housing, but by the mid-1950s, East Harlemites, led by a coalition of social workers, started a campaign to reenvision public housing. Drawing on the talents of planner Albert Mayer and editor and writer Jane Jacobs, they produced a series of redesigned plazas and housing plans set into rather than on top of the urban fabric of the neighborhood. They worked to undo the practice of bulldozer renewal, to encourage more community-friendly planning, and to ease racial tension by bringing neighborhood groups together in community organizations and redesigned urban spaces. In the process, they offered one of the first full critiques of modernist urbanism and what they called its “mass way of life.” Their attempts to rethink urban renewal from the same neighborhood perspective that Lincoln Square residents had championed laid the groundwork for the undoing of urban renewal.

Whatever the fate of urban renewal itself, it had deep and lasting effects on Manhattan, the entire city of New York, and American political culture. At first glance, this seems improbable. Compared to the private real estate market, urban renewal built comparatively little. Between 1949 and the early 1960s, Robert Moses built 16 privately backed projects in Manhattan and the boroughs.

NYCHA added scores of public projects—152 by 1965—in the years between the New Deal and President Richard Nixon’s embargo on public housing construction in the early 1970s. And yet, this impact pales beside the dubious gift to the city’s built environment left by the combined, uncoordinated efforts of thousands of builders, developers, and real estate schemers who remade New York in the postwar era. As impressive as Stuyvesant Town, Lincoln Center, and the rows of public projects lining the East River Drive may be, today they are swallowed up by the city—each one an almost indistinguishable set of towers amid the jumble. By the 1970s, all of midtown had been remade by glass-curtain skyscrapers; First, Second, and Third avenues were lined from 20th Street to Harlem with apartment towers. But the impact of urban renewal cannot be measured in numbers of buildings put up or acres cleared and re-covered with towers and open space. Its effects were both subtler and deeper. While it obviously never succeeded in wholly rebuilding the island of Manhattan, nor in remaking the entire built environment of the nation’s great metropolis, it did play a crucial role in the history of New York and the postwar United States. Urban renewal’s significance was not simply in its raw power to transform the city, but in the far greater influence it had over the terms by which cities were understood and in the fact that it called forth a series of public controversies in which New Yorkers and other Americans debated the impacts of modernism, progress, public and private power, and Cold War ideology on culture, politics, and social life.

No doubt, the greatest fact of postwar American life was unprecedented economic prosperity. This newfound plenty was underwritten by a particular approach to political economy, one that, like urban renewal, was jump-started during World War II. Advocates of economic growth—emboldened by a war-time spending boom that dispelled fears of economic stagnation lingering in the wake of the Great Depression—guided the nation toward a policy of expanded government spending to stoke the fires of private production and consumption. This “politics of growth,” as sociologist Alan Wolfe has called it, sought to update the domestic policies of the New Deal to fit the so-called American century, that era of American cultural and political dominance over the world heralded by Time-Life publisher Henry Luce. According to Luce, the United States, flush with cash, militarily superior, possessed of a wealth of commodities for which the world longed, should be both powerful and good. “For every dollar we spend on armaments, we should spend at least a dime in a gigantic effort to feed the world,” he wrote.¹⁶

Policymakers like Leon Keyserling, the New Deal housing economist who became head of the Council of Economic Advisers under President Truman, offered an economic policy that could underwrite this mission. They believed that increased government spending and private consumption would ward off

another depression and push the economy to ever-higher levels of growth. The unprecedented tax revenue surpluses such growth produced, Keyserling suggested, could be reinvested in the social programs that had previously been underwritten by direct federal spending during the New Deal. In the formulation offered by Henry Luce, dollars for armaments would produce dimes for feeding the poor.¹⁷

The success of economic growth policies was measured in a number of ways. Abroad, it showed in military might, the informal empire of international economic influence, the global proliferation of images of rising postwar prosperity and affluence. At home, the rising capacity of ordinary spenders to drive the nation's economic and cultural engines seemed to confirm these policies' wisdom. As such, their crowning domestic glory was the spread of the developer-built communities of single-family homes that collected outside cities and seemed to represent freedom, abundance, and happiness to a generation of Americans seeking respite from two decades of depression and war. Suburban growth and the decline of industrial cities were at the heart of the American century and the era of economic growth. Despite the democratic rhetoric of equal benefits for everyone that accompanied the politics of growth, the affluence the United States enjoyed in the postwar years was a product of urban decline. As historian Robert Beauregard has argued, economic growth policies made places profitable by shifting capital from cities to suburbs and the Sunbelt. "To achieve prosperity and dominance," he writes, "the United States had to sacrifice its industrial cities."¹⁸

However, the campaign to rebuild American cities along modern lines was a no less crucial part of an urban politics of growth. Urban renewal may appear now as simply a hopeless rearguard action, but at the time it seemed the best hope to return the central city to its former glory and to extend to city-dwellers the abundance promised by the idea of the American century. The 1949 Housing Act enacted a historic compromise between conservative realtors and downtown business interests and progressive supporters of public housing, in the process solidifying a pro-growth coalition of urban liberals, planners, developers, business interests, and housing reformers that supported the reclaiming of the central city. This compromise was hailed as the high tide of postwar urban liberalism. The act ushered in a new urban age, a time that the housing reformer Elizabeth Wood called "an era of urban renewal and high employment," when general prosperity, it was hoped, would underwrite the salvation of cities.¹⁹

Urban renewal's central role in growth policies prepared it to play an equally significant part in the great political drama of the era. It emerged as a battleground on the domestic front of the Cold War, appearing first as a weapon and then as a hazard for the United States. In the late 1940s and '50s, renewal—more

market-minded than ostensibly “socialistic” public housing—was drafted into service as evidence that the United States was meeting its internal challenges. As time went by, however, renewal’s impact began to rankle, its association with the idea of a mass society narrowed the perceptual gap between it and public housing, and it would prove more of a liability in the struggle of images and ideas waged for hearts and minds.

In 1946, when the American diplomat George Kennan sent his famous “long telegram” back to Washington from Moscow, warning his colleagues of the threat posed by the Soviet Union, he made sure to stress the importance of putting the homefront in order. Calling Communism a “malignant parasite which feeds only on diseased tissue,” Kennan advised that “every courageous and incisive measure to solve internal problems of our own society, to improve self-confidence, discipline, morale, and community spirit of our own people, is a diplomatic victory over Moscow worth a thousand diplomatic notes and joint communiqués.” A few years later, the authors of the highly influential national security document NSC 68 adopted the spirit of Kennan’s warning by recommending that massive conventional military rearmament be supported by pro-growth policies, with the inevitable surpluses funding abundance at home. As the foundations of Cold War policy and the link between Keyserling’s growth initiatives and the Cold War effort, these documents suggested how urban renewal, like other pro-growth policies, could function as a key component of a domestic containment effort to secure an orderly and prosperous homefront and complement containment of the Soviet Union on the international level.²⁰

The climate of urgency generated around the domestic front of the Cold War in the late 1940s and 1950s reverberated in the fields of housing and urban renewal. “We have been told that we must gather our strength for the long pull,” said NYCHA executive director Gerald J. Carey in a 1951 speech before the National Association of Housing Officials, attacking proposed cuts in funds for public housing. “The struggle is one not alone of force, but of ideologies,” he continued. Public housing may not be “the one weapon, or even the most important weapon, with which we will defeat Communism in general, or the Soviet Union in particular,” he said, but “the strength that comes from unity of purpose and equality of sacrifice is needlessly sapped” when public housing funds are cut.²¹

For some, both public housing and urban renewal appeared to be handy weapons in this war of images and impressions because slums and urban decay were seen as a threat to domestic tranquility. Advocates of clearance had long said that slums needed to be cut out like cancers that undermined healthy city life. In the postwar period, they became, in Kennan’s terms, “diseased tissue” of another kind: food for parasitic Communism, a dangerous weakness in the domestic bulwark against socialism and collectivist social philosophies. For

instance, the famous educator and Cold Warrior James Conant warned of the dangers of metropolitan inequity. “What can words like ‘freedom,’ ‘liberty,’ and ‘equality of opportunity’” mean for inner-city children? he asked. Their upbringing, he feared, left them with few resources to withstand “the relentless pressures of communism.”²²

While some housing advocates saw public housing as a weapon in beating back the Communist threat, many Americans saw it as socialistic and un-American. Public/private urban renewal, on the other hand, could operate as a potential immunization against the threat, a way to beat the Soviets at their own game. Urban renewal was at the heart of what historian Nicholas Dagen Bloom calls the “businessman’s utopia,” the arrangement by which urban business interests walked a tightrope between federal and private power, trying to save the inner city through publicly subsidized private initiatives rather than outright state direction of the housing market. This effort was a competitive response to the gains in urban social welfare demonstrated in Western Europe and the Soviet Union. Businesspeople who supported Federal Housing Administration policies and urban renewal thought that American cities could be reclaimed more efficiently through private enterprise than through state activism of either the social democratic or Communist variety. But they feared the apparent successes of socialist urbanism, and knew that if business could not clear the slums and rehouse their residents in new, modern communities, more state-friendly schemes might be given room to try.²³

Urban renewal would represent, like racial desegregation in the same years, an effort to contain the infelicities of American life for Cold War onlookers abroad. By alleviating inequities, urban renewal would promote the idea that cities were entering a new era of abundance and rational modernity for all. Cities would become true partners with the “sitcom suburbs” in the triumphal progression of American postwar prosperity.

And yet, urban renewal did not so much contain as uproot and transform. Not only did it start to become clear that urban renewal deepened rather than ameliorated racial segregation and urban poverty, it also began to appear that its supposed advances in housing and planning undermined American ideals. In fact, urban renewal itself would be undermined by the extent to which its new cityscape began to seem just as regimented and anonymous as public housing—the landscape of a new “mass society.” Its urban interventions could appear—and feel, as its new residents testified—authoritarian and imposed, rather than open and available as it seemed on the planners’ drawing boards and in modernist visions. If urban renewal had initially represented all for which the United States fought in the Cold War, it increasingly resembled just what the country was mobilized to resist. By the late 1950s and early ’60s, slum clearance and modern

planning had joined public housing in the public eye as a threat to abundance and prosperity, a national symbol of the failure of postwar urban liberalism to master the turbulence of cities. Slum clearance evacuees and modern housing towers evoked the divided urban landscape—suburban plenty at the fringe and urban deprivation at the core—that marked the dawning age of “urban crisis.”²⁴

Urban renewal in New York, however, had a somewhat subtler impact. In the city, and in Manhattan in particular, urban renewal was key to understanding not only the split between city and suburb, but also the divided landscape of the city itself. Like all the other industrial cities of the North and Midwest, New York faced powerful economic challenges in the postwar era, when federal housing and highway policy underwrote the suburbanization of homes, industry, and commerce, pulling jobs and capital to the edges of the city. As early as the 1950s, just as Robert Moses’s projects began to sprout, the city was already feeling the early effects of this decentralization. And yet, these were boom years for Manhattan as well, a period when the city was enjoying its resounding power as the capital of modernity and culture, the headquarters of global capitalism, and a symbol of American power during the Cold War. Urban renewal arrived at Manhattan’s moment of triumph, offering to renovate the city in line with the metropolis’s mythic postwar image of itself. In the end, it would inaugurate forces that heralded both New York’s descent into the urban crisis and its rise to world city status.

New York’s postwar prosperity and cosmopolitan élan owed much more than is commonly understood to its unique, small-scale, intricate, working-class, industrial economy and culture. The city was not dominated by one major industry like Pittsburgh or Detroit, with their steel mills and car factories. Its dense mixture of industry and commerce; the preponderance of small workplaces; a diverse, highly skilled workforce; custom or “small-batch” production; less developed divisions of labor; and versatile but densely communal industries (like the garment trade) gave the city a resilience that other industrial monocultures did not have. Still, during the postwar decades, many manufacturing jobs decamped to the suburbs and to the new, centerless, sprawling urban areas of the South and West. Federal, state, and city policymakers did little to discourage the choices made by managers looking for larger, more modern plants, easier access to national transportation networks, lower taxes, and more pliant, non-union workforces. In fact, most contemporary social policy and urban planning doctrines suggested that overall metropolitan economic development would be best served by perpetuating the decentralization of industry and that white-collar opportunities should replace departing factory jobs at the urban core. Corporate managers in the financial, real estate, and entertainment sectors were happy to oblige, leveraging their power through various foundations, public/private

partnerships, and commissions to rezone the center of Manhattan for white-collar uses, further hastening the displacement of New York's industry. Meanwhile, Robert Moses's system of federally subsidized postwar expressways pushed the city farther into its hinterlands and made a regional metropolis out of the old centered city. White ethnic workers could now join jobs and the middle class in an intensifying exodus to the far reaches of Queens and the suburbs, where they enjoyed federal subsidies for whites-only homeownership. At the same time, just as jobs, capital, and white residents departed, New York attracted thousands of African American and Puerto Rican migrants. These new arrivals transformed the complexion and culture of New York's working class, but they also increased the burdens on the city's elaborate social welfare system, filled public housing, and made up the majority of those who were displaced by slum clearance.²⁵

Twenty years after the close of World War II, New York's prestige and influence would not be entirely diminished, but by 1965 it had become clear to most Americans that something had gone terribly wrong. Despite years of national economic prosperity, New York was beset by a host of social ills stemming from industrial job loss and the tide of new migrants, conditions that appeared in the form of deepening poverty, entrenched segregation, racial strife, and rioting in a series of long hot summers, accelerating white flight, the apparent failure of public housing, and the mounting displacements of slum clearance. Observers of city life began to talk about an urban crisis or "a city destroying itself"; many bemoaned a loss of civility and worried for the viability of urban life in New York and other cities.²⁶

Urban renewal was initially thought of as a way to offset the deleterious effects of decentralization, an attempt to keep investment, wealth, and the middle class downtown. But urban renewal exacerbated the process of deindustrialization and decentralization, replacing factories and warehouses with apartment towers, university buildings, hospital complexes, and cultural institutions. It also heightened and perpetuated the emerging social and class divisions, renovating and upscaling some formerly downtrodden neighborhoods, but displacing poor populations into nearby slums or into public housing, thereby reinforcing the racial segregation and ghetto boundaries that clearance had hoped to disperse. In New York, as in other older northeastern and midwestern cities, the urban crisis and "second ghetto" of the 1960s and '70s had its roots not in the liberal government social policies of the 1960s—which were said to encourage lawless behavior and a lack of personal responsibility—but in the vast transformations wrought by public/private urban renewal and public housing policies starting in the '40s and '50s.²⁷

Alongside crisis and decline, however, went triumph and glory. Postwar New York was at the heart of the American century, the home of modernity and the

preeminent American Cold War city. On Manhattan island, captains of finance and industry bucked the suburban trend under way across much of the nation. Instead, they expanded their central office operations on the island, making the city into the nation's preeminent "headquarters town" and the center of an emerging global economy. All over midtown and Wall Street sprouted new glass- and steel-skinned skyscrapers, the ultimate symbols of modernity, tangible examples of the payoff provided by modernization and growth. While the actual political and diplomatic course of the Cold War was established in Washington, it was Manhattan's banks, corporate directors, and foreign policy elite that directed the expansion of the Cold War national security state, while its growing social welfare provisions put the surpluses of the pro-growth economy to work ensuring the livelihoods of ordinary citizens. The city also housed the headquarters of the world's most powerful makers of opinion, news, and entertainment and provided offices for the theater, publishing, advertising, and magazine industries. The island's painters, dancers, musicians, and poets were the world's foremost modern artists; their movements and aesthetics, particularly abstract expressionism in painting, were often depicted in Cold War terms as exemplars of American freedom, despite the fact that more conservative elements saw them as dangerously cosmopolitan and even subversive of common sense and rationality. The city seemed, in other words, to be the summation of the new and the font of postwar power.²⁸

Urban renewal assumed an important but little appreciated role in these triumphal undertakings. In New York, it not only helped to cause the urban crisis, it also preserved and enhanced the city's claim to be the capital of the world by providing it with the institutional infrastructure to actually become the world city it appeared to be at the close of the war, when the United Nations went up on Turtle Bay. Urban renewal, in many ways, served to jump-start the Manhattan boom years of the late '40s and '50s. Robert Moses and his urban renewal allies took many of the initial risks required to underwrite the spread of white-collar culture. Their projects made room in the city grid for research medicine, high culture, and higher education; they cleared away industry and working-class neighborhoods; they set down islands of middle-income and luxury housing in seas of tenements; they established beachheads for profitable investment in urban land in neighborhoods like the Gas House District and Lincoln Square that were removed from the towers of midtown and long abandoned by private capital; they gave spark to short-term, neighborhood-level real estate booms; they prepared the ground for the long, slow waves of gentrification that have waxed and waned for a half-century right down to our own time. Urban renewal was a first step, faltering perhaps, but first nonetheless, in an epochal transformation that continues to remake Manhattan and all of New York in the twenty-first century.

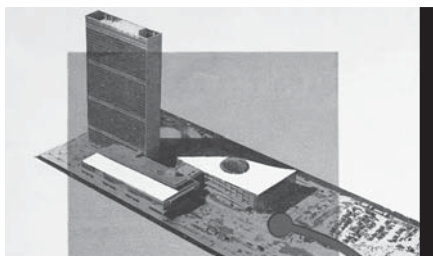
In the end, urban renewal came and went as a way to remake cities, but its checkered career provides us with an opportunity to look anew at the postwar years in New York. The 1960s in the city are often seen as a tragic fall from the glorious heights of the '40s and '50s, a long slide from, as architectural historian Robert A. M. Stern has put it, "world capital to near collapse." However, the lens of urban renewal helps us to see how these two seemingly disparate developments—the rise of a world city and the decline into urban crisis—were coterminous and mutually dependent. Together, they worked to create the distinct profile of modern, late twentieth-century Manhattan, with its bifurcated landscape of shimmering towers and stark ghettos. New York's decline was actually a transformation, announcing not only the descent into urban crisis but also the rise of a white-collar world city. Urban renewal was at the heart of this transformation, remaking the very space of the city as it gave rise to the upheavals at the root of the city's power and shame.²⁹

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CHAPTER 1

CLEARING THE SLUM CALLED WAR

This Island Fantasy

It used to be that the Statue of Liberty was the signpost that proclaimed New York and translated it for all the world. Today Liberty shares the role with Death. Along the East River, from the razed slaughterhouses of Turtle Bay, as though in a race with the spectral flight of planes, men are carving out the permanent headquarters of the United Nations—the greatest housing project of them all. In its stride, New York takes on one more interior city, to shelter, this time, all governments, and to clear the slum called war.

—E. B. White, *Here Is New York*, 1948

For a few days in the summer of 1948—“during a hot spell,” he said—the essayist E. B. White returned to his old home of Manhattan on assignment for the up-market travel magazine *Holiday*. The result was a piece—later published as a little book called *Here Is New York*—that stands as one of the great and lasting accounts of New York. In it, White ranges across a broad swath of Manhattan, accounting for the island’s habits and manners; noting its desires, dangers, and joys; and sorting out its natives, commuters, and seekers. He finds that all of these collect and mingle under the sway of three intimately entwined but contradictory elements of New York life. First is the city’s imperturbable, anonymous nature, its ability to “absorb almost anything that comes along” while still bestowing the “queer prizes” of privacy and loneliness. Then there is the compensation it offers for those dubious gifts: as the “greatest human concentrate on earth” and a “permanent exhibit of the phenomenon of one world,” New York “makes up for its hazards and its deficiencies by supplying its citizens with massive doses of a supplementary vitamin—the sense of belonging to something unique, cosmopolitan, mighty and unparalleled.” Like Claude Lévi-Strauss, White celebrates the medium in which loneliness and worldly belonging are reconciled: the city’s series of “countless small neighborhoods,” each with its own “little main street,” its customs, and its diurnal patterns not unlike those practiced by country villagers. These in combination give the city its unequalled sense of congeniality, longing, and promise.

But then, as he draws his essay to a close, White interrupts his reverie. Among the back and forth of late '40s Manhattan, he is struck by the hint of something dark and worrisome. He notices a new menace, one that is drawn by the city's cosmopolitan singularity, but might threaten to shatter its inviolability, privacy, and neighborliness:

The subtlest change in New York is something people don't speak much about but that is in everyone's mind. The city, for the first time in its long history, is destructible. A single flight of planes no bigger than a wedge of geese can quickly end this island fantasy, burn the towers, crumble the bridges, turn the underground passages into lethal chambers, cremate the millions.

Yet, even in the face of the new atomic threat, all hope is not lost. White was a proponent of what he called "federal world government," and he warily notes that the United Nations, arising "from the razed slaughterhouses of Turtle Bay," offers the promise of turning back "the spectral flight of planes" and nudging the world toward peace and away from war. Not only that, but the arrival of the United Nations in Manhattan brings to a head New York's role as the icon of its age. The city, he writes,

at last perfectly illustrates both the universal dilemma and the general solution, this riddle in steel and stone is at once the perfect target and the perfect demonstration of nonviolence, of racial brotherhood, this lofty target scraping the skies and meeting the destroying planes halfway, home of all people and all nations, capital of everything, housing the deliberations by which the planes are to be stayed and their errand forestalled.

If the United Nations can succeed in its mission, White implies, and keep the towers from burning and the bridges from crumbling, then it will not only usher in world peace and preserve "this island fantasy," but also triumphantly cap the postwar ascendance of New York and the United States to the world stage. The city, he writes, is not "a national capital or a state capital," but now "capital of the world" and, in fact, the "capital of everything." White was giving voice to a common trope among liberal internationalists and New York boosters in those days. New York's vision of itself as the cultural capital of the world—solidified 20 years later with the building of Lincoln Center—begins with the arrival of the United Nations in the late '40s. But White's musings also suggest that the United Nations can help to underwrite New York's capital city status in a more unexpected way as well.

In a telling association, White describes the United Nations as "the greatest housing project of them all" whose purpose it is to "clear the slum called war." On its face, White's offhand association between the UN headquarters and a