

# **Planning the Great Metropolis**

The 1929 Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs

David A. Johnson

# Planning the Great Metropolis

As the Regional Plan Association embarks on a Fourth Regional Plan, there can be no better time for a paperback edition of David Johnson's critically acclaimed assessment of the 1929 Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs. As he says in his preface to this edition, the questions faced by the regional planners of today are little changed from those their predecessors faced in the 1920s.

Derided by some, accused by others of being the root cause of New York City's relative economic and physical decline, the 1929 Plan was in reality an important source of ideas for many projects built during the New Deal era of the 1930s.

In his detailed examination of the Plan, Johnson traces its origins to Progressive era and Daniel Burnham's 1909 Plan of Chicago. He describes the making of the Plan under the direction of Scotsman Thomas Adams, its reception in the New York Region, and its partial realization.

The story he tells has important lessons for planners, decision-makers and citizens facing an increasingly urban future where the physical plan approach may again have a critical role to play.

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The 1929 Regional Plan of New York  
and Its Environs

*David A. Johnson*

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# PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

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This book is about the making and impact of an audacious plan for America's greatest metropolis, the New York, New Jersey and Connecticut metropolitan area. Privately funded and independent of government, the Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs had considerable impact on the subsequent development of the region as well as on the theory and practice of planning. In the final analysis, though, the 1929 Plan tried, but failed, to straddle the great fault line in American society between wealth and commonwealth, between the primacy of property or of people. Nowhere was this more evident than in the war of words between Lewis Mumford, the urban critic, and Thomas Adams, the British planner who directed the making of the Plan. Mumford took the view that the city and the urban region existed to provide a decent life for its people and should be planned accordingly. Adams, following the lead of his business-dominated Committee on the Regional Plan, had little choice but to work within the realities of the American economic and legal system. Not that the regional planners were oblivious to social needs. The 'Progressive' reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sought not to remake the society according to utopian formulations but rather to remedy and regulate the excesses of a raw market economy. The people supporting the making of the Regional Plan followed in direct lineage the liberal reformers who were leaders in the slavery abolitionist movement and in later institutional reforms such as the creation of the American Red Cross, the Federal Reserve System, and the Port of New York Authority. The banking and philanthropic sponsors of the Regional Plan embraced the concept of *noblesse oblige*, the notion that elites should give back something in civic amenities, educational improvement or economic melioration of poverty. While *noblesse oblige* was no substitute for the structural reforms needed to address the disparities and injustices of the social and economic order, it helped to shape Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal depression relief programmes.

It is timely to see a reissue of this book since the New York Metropolitan region today faces many of the same problems identified by the planners of the 1920s:

- ◆ a shortage of affordable housing;
- ◆ areas of the city and region poorly served by public transportation resulting in excessively long commuter trips for many workers;
- ◆ how best to realize the potential of underutilized waterfronts;
- ◆ how to control the clustering and heights of buildings in business districts;
- ◆ restructuring the economy to reduce growing social inequalities;



- ◆ the need to protect natural areas for environmental and recreation needs;
- ◆ a deficiency of Hudson River crossing capacity for rail and transit.

It is pathetic that one of the world's great cities has not been able to build new desperately needed trans-Hudson transportation capacity even though the need was clearly evident as long ago as the 1920s. By contrast, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century New York implemented a number of bold development moves. These included the 1811 Commissioners' Plan which gave Manhattan its real estate-friendly gridiron, the Croton and Catskill Water systems, a great Central Park, consolidation of the Greater City in 1898, and multiple bridge and tunnel crossings of the East River, all still in use. By contrast, today's public infrastructure maintenance and development are neglected. While other world cities such as Paris and London are able to move ahead with bold plans, New York and its region struggle merely to keep its old facilities functioning. The decay of public urban infrastructure is striking evidence of political paralysis and of misplaced national priorities. The New York metropolitan region has for decades been limited in its ability to shape its development destiny. Key transportation decisions are made in Washington and in the distant capitals of the three states of the region. Getting these actors to work together has always proved difficult and sometimes impossible.

The Regional Plan Association (RPA), created in 1929 to implement the 1929 Regional Plan and still actively at work in the Region, has announced a project for a Fourth Regional Plan. The Second Regional Plan was released by RPA in 1966 and the Third Regional Plan, in 1996. These successor plans had important impacts on the Region and helped shape public discourse on development needs and priorities.

The Second and Third Regional Plans tended to emphasize general policies rather than the comprehensive detailed physical plan approach of the 1929 Plan. It will be interesting to see whether the Fourth Regional Plan moves towards an environmental planning approach that utilizes the computer-based geo-design techniques that are revolutionizing regional and metropolitan planning.

The future of the planet and our descendants will, for better or worse, be an urban future. Are we capable of shaping that future so it is sustainable and favourable to human habitation? Can we shape large urban agglomerations so that they function efficiently and are environmentally sustainable? How do we anticipate and use emerging technologies to achieve those ends? Whose values and whose power to decide will shape the future? These are all questions the regional planners faced in 1929. We still face them.

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# PREFACE

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Twenty-five years ago, I was Senior Planner for the non-profit Regional Plan Association and was involved in studies for an ambitious new Second Regional Plan for the New York Metropolitan Area. It was an audacious undertaking by this unique private research association which has been working for the better development of the New York Region since 1929. My involvement in the Second Regional Plan naturally stirred my curiosity about its predecessor, the Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs, published in 1929 by the Committee on the Regional Plan of New York, the forerunner of the Regional Plan Association. The files of the Committee on the Regional Plan of New York and the records and drawings of its staff rested in a storeroom near my desk in a mid-town Manhattan skyscraper. Occasionally, I would thumb through the old reports and papers to see how a previous generation of planners had approached problems not unlike those with which we grappled. After forty years, the first Regional Plan has, of course, long since ceased to be very useful as a source of concepts or proposals. But tantalizing questions remained: how had the 1929 Regional Plan taken shape? Who were the people behind the Plan? Whose interests were being served? And what impact did the Plan have on the subsequent development of New York and the surrounding counties?

It was not possible at the time to search out answers to those intriguing questions. Then, quite by coincidence, both I and the voluminous files and records of the 1929 Regional Plan of New York moved at about the same time to Cornell University: I to resume graduate studies in planning, and the papers to be deposited in the Olin Library Collection of Regional History. The opportunity to answer those questions proved irresistible. The questions, I hope, have been answered in this book. But in the chapters that follow, there is more than simply the fulfilment of a long-standing personal interest. I have sought to shed additional light on an important American experience, the thrust toward metropolitan reform, and more generally, on the decade immediately after World War I, a period too often characterized as a hiatus in social change in the United States. During the 1920s the reforms of the Progressive Era were transformed to become the foundations of the emergent Administrative State. It was a decade of vitality and movement, a small but significant episode of which is chronicled here.

This book goes further, though, than merely presenting a chronicle of events, however interesting they may be. It attempts a systematic evaluation of the impact of a major regional plan. There have been few, if any, previous efforts to analyze, after the fact, the long-term effects of comprehensive metropolitan plans. The activities described in these pages may therefore be of interest to today's urban and regional planners who wish to know something about the origins of their profession – if only to transcend them. A great deal of current planning behavior, for better or worse, can be traced to what happened in the New York Region in the

1920s. Indeed, the Regional Plan Association is at the time of writing completing a *Third* Regional Plan for the New York ,New Jersey, Connecticut metropolitan region. The challenge of shaping this complex cosmopolitan area is just as great today as it was in the 1920s, perhaps more so. Contemporary regional planners can learn much from their predecessors.

Many people contributed to the research on which this book has been based. The primary sources for the study were the papers of the Committee on the Regional Plan of New York, the papers of the Regional Plan Association, and the John Nolen papers, all of which are now part of the Olin Library Collection of Regional History at Cornell University. Interviews and assistance granted by six men, all now deceased, who were central figures in the events described in this book, were of inestimable help: Robert Moses, Lawrence M. Orton, and Harold M. Lewis each provided information unavailable elsewhere. Flavel Shurtleff and C. McKim Norton also furnished helpful comments and materials. Lewis Mumford kindly gave permission to quote his private correspondence concerning the Regional Plan. Responsibility for the interpretations made of the information furnished by these men is solely my own. I doubt that each would have agreed with all of my conclusions regarding the Regional Plan of New York, though I hope they would have regarded my use of the material provided as fair and accurate.

At Cornell University, Kermit C. Parson, Barclay G. Jones, John W. Reps, Edward S. Flash and the late Stephen W. Jacobs, provided very helpful direction and encouragement during the gestation of this work. Jameson W. Doig, John P. Keith, William B. Shore, and Richard T. Anderson offered valuable ideas and advice. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Regional Plan Association for additional materials and maps and to the Syracuse University Geography Department Cartographic Laboratory for making its facilities available. Thanks go also to The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, which provided a faculty leave grant making it possible to conduct additional research in New York. Victoria Johnson and Heather Ewing provided superb typing and editorial review. Ann Rudkin, of Alexandrine Press, provided the kind of outstanding editorial oversight and help all authors yearn for. My wife, Eleanor Stephens Johnson, provided indispensable advice, criticism, assistance, and support during the long evolution of this project. For whatever quality may be found in this work, the credit is theirs. The mistakes and shortcomings are my own.

*David A. Johnson  
Knoxville, Tennessee  
September 1995*

(Note: A portion of this book was previously published as chapter 7, 'Regional Planning for the Great American Metropolis', in Daniel Schaffer (ed.) (1988) *Two Centuries of American Planning*. London: Mansell.)

The New Yorker of 1965 will have plenty of room, if he wants it. He will not spend so much of his time sitting in stationary motor cars in congested traffic, unless he really wishes to. He will not have to brave the perils of the open streets so often. He will be able to get around the 5,000 square miles of the region far more easily than now. But he will not have so much occasion to do so. His job, his recreations, his stores, his children's schools will be much more conveniently situated with respect to where he lives than they are now.... Easy transit in 1965 will really be easy, not the present struggle against crowds. The suburban resident may choose to live far out. If he does he will find it possible to reach Manhattan by belt lines, similar to the trunk belt lines of the main railways, which will carry him, without need of changing cars, from a point near his home to within walking distance of his office.... Double-decked and triple-decked streets, gardened terraces, lofty footpaths, perhaps built of glass so as to permit light to penetrate to the lower levels, and towers shooting a thousand feet and more into the clouds, like miniature mountain peaks, are features of this idea. In such buildings the residents might, if they choose, live out their entire lives without setting foot on ground.... A process of re-building will have gone on all over Manhattan, the old tenements will have disappeared, garden apartments will have taken their places, parked motor cars will have disappeared from the streets, into sub-surface garages, or sky-scraper storage buildings, the smoke evil will have been done away with and the community will have progressed far towards the ideal of a spotless city.

‘New York in 1965’, *The Morning Bulletin*  
(Rockhampton, Queensland, Australia)  
September 6, 1928

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# INTRODUCTION

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Between 1910 and 1929 regional plans were initiated by citizens' groups for a number of large metropolitan areas in the United States, the most notable, New York and its environs. Metropolitan regional planning in this period linked Progressive era planning and reform movements to the thrust towards administrative efficiency and to the responses evoked by the beginning of mass ownership of the automobile. Reforms at the national level, such as the creation of the Federal Reserve System, and the emergency administrative measures taken during World War I prompted calls for similar centralizing administrative reforms at the metropolitan level. The spread of urban development beyond city boundaries produced by the automobile and the demand for remedies to growing traffic congestion created an unstable political vacuum into which the planner-reformers hoped to move.

In the New York area the planners' response took the form of a monumental Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs. Ultimately, some 1.2 million dollars was spent on its preparation, making it perhaps the most costly planning endeavor ever undertaken in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Privately organized by businessmen and financiers and funded by the Russell Sage Foundation, the Plan provided a blueprint for transforming New York into a physically integrated metropolis of twenty million people by 1965. Completed in 1929, the Plan had considerable impact on the development of highways, parkways, and open space. Studies made for the Plan contributed many new techniques and concepts to urban and regional theory, including economic base theory, advances in population projection techniques, and the concept and term, 'freeway'. The Plan also changed the character of the urban planning profession by establishing the need for a greater knowledge of social science as a foundation for physical planning. The creation of separate departments of city and regional planning in institutions of higher education can also be traced to activities related to the Regional Plan of New York.

The non-governmental regional planner-reformers were not the only groups that emerged to fill the political vacuum created by the growth of the New York Region. State-sponsored bodies under Robert Moses and the Port of New York Authority were initiated during this period and carried out many of the proposals of the Regional Plan, or, alternatively, made proposals that were incorporated into the Plan.

Constrained by political and institutional realities and the fiscally cautious and efficiency-oriented philosophy of its sponsors and organizers, the Plan

took on a cautious, project-oriented cast, embodying the values and enhancing the interests of a growing, suburbanizing, affluent upper-middle class. The Plan emphasized highway construction and acquisition of outlying parklands. It made few proposals to provide for the needs of the urban poor, failing especially to cope with the problem of low-and moderate-income housing.

A general, integrating, upward social mobility was implicitly assumed in the Plan. An evaluation of the impact of the Plan indicates that to the extent to which upward class movement by the children of the urban ethnic poor occurred, the Plan worked to redistribute regional social wealth. For its contemporary generation, however, the Plan largely reflected efficiency rather than equity values.

Though its target year was 1965, the Plan's period of relevance and influence was short – only about ten years – and by the outbreak of World War II in 1941 it was for most purposes obsolete. The successful implementation of many proposals in the Plan was achieved by several means: by the inclusion of pre-existing, long-standing proposals, by endorsement and incorporation of proposals made by public authorities with their own development capabilities, or through consultation between the technical staffs of the Plan and the regional authorities. The subsequent proposals of these technicians often conformed to proposals that had been made in the Regional Plan. The transfer of proposals between parallel, special-function technical staffs such as the highway engineers seems to have been a particularly effective means of placing unofficial Plan proposals on the public agenda.

The Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs was a flawed development guide, which nevertheless had a profound impact on the New York Region and on planning thought and practice, and therefore should be regarded as a major event in American urban history. Given the significance of the Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs, it seems an oversight that to date, little major research or analysis has been undertaken on the making of the Plan and its subsequent impact on American urbanism. The most detailed review was that of the critic, Lewis Mumford, which was published shortly after the appearance of the final Plan volume in 1932. Mumford, in a trenchant and detailed analysis, attacked the Plan for its acceptance of metropolitan growth and congestion as inevitable, a reflection, he thought, of the exploitative values of its business and philanthropic sponsors.<sup>2</sup>

In the decade after the Plan was published, three successive progress reports were prepared by the Regional Plan Association, the private advisory group created to carry out the proposals in the Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs.<sup>3</sup> But these compendia of accomplishments could hardly have been expected to take an impartial view of the proposals contained in the Plan.

It was not until 1963 that the Plan captured the interest of several writers, who were prompted, no doubt, by a renewed concern for the plight of the

cities. Roy Lubove took a fresh look at efforts in the 1920s to cope with the problems of metropolitan regional development.<sup>4</sup> His focus was primarily on the Regional Planning Association of America, the loosely knit but influential group of intellectuals and architects which included Lewis Mumford, Henry Wright, Clarence Stein, and Benton MacKaye, among others. Lubove compared the work of the Regional Planning Association of America with that of the Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs and found the latter far less heroic and humane, though more powerful. Lubove nevertheless recognized the significance of the Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs for subsequent developments in the New York Region:

The RPNYE constituted a landmark in planning history for the collaboration in a single project of planners, architects, engineers, lawyers, economists, social workers, and other specialists. The Plan they devised, moreover, was significant for its practical influence. It was eminently successful, if measured by the number of proposals subsequently adopted by local government agencies. The Russell Sage Plan, finally, greatly stimulated the growth of both local and county planning organization in the Metropolitan Region. Particularly important in this respect was the Regional Plan Association Inc., established in 1929 and still active.<sup>5</sup>

Lubove's tempered but generally negative conclusions about the work of the Committee on the Regional Plan were not entirely shared by Forbes B. Hays, who undertook a brief history of the Regional Plan Association, published in 1965.<sup>6</sup> Hays' major interest was the emergence of the Regional Plan Association as a civic leadership group guiding public opinion on regional issues. He emphasized the importance of the Plan as a factor in shaping the subsequent commitments of the Association to regionalism, comprehensiveness, and physical planning. Hays' focus, as a political scientist, was on organizational development for implementing the Plan rather than on an assessment of the Plan itself. He concluded, however, that the Plan was 'an integral conception, attempting to relate systematically several major factors of regional development, starting from a statement of the problems and a set of priorities that were a compound of what the survey research revealed and what the planners' judgment and intuition suggested.'<sup>7</sup>

By 1933, twenty-eight of the fifty-one proposals in the Plan that were classified as urgent had been carried out or officially adopted, suggesting a high rate of accomplishment. Hays correctly concluded that to attribute all of these successes to the influence of the Plan was to risk a *post hoc* fallacy. Many of the proposals had been suggested or developed by others, as the makers of the Plan readily admitted. Nevertheless, the Plan, in Hays' view, could at least be credited *prima facie* with having synthesized and coordinated these proposals and, thereby, having helped to bring them to completion. But Hays carefully and quite properly avoided making excessive claims for either the virtues of the Plan or its direct impact on subsequent decision-making.



Christopher Tunnard, in his 1968 survey, *The Modern American City*, lavished praise on the Plan, labeling it 'a bold stab at the task of metropolitan development along orderly lines, and an important influence.'<sup>8</sup> Tunnard rejected the Mumford criticisms of excessive growth and congestion, and suggested that Mumford has 'ignored the Plan's quest for livability in the giant region's surroundings, an approach which was advanced for its day.'<sup>9</sup>

Mel Scott, in his 1969 history, *American City Planning Since 1890*, skillfully placed the Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs in the perspective of the larger trends that shaped American planning thought in the first three decades of the century. Scott's chronicle of the development and implementation of the Plan is woven into the warp of the municipal and housing reform movements, the 'scientific management' concept, and the changing technologies of urban life. In contrast to Tunnard, Scott was less than enthusiastic in assessing the impact of the Regional Plan. While he concluded that Charles Dyer Norton, the driving force behind the inception of the Plan, was ahead of his time in envisioning the need for a regional approach, Scott looked on the Plan that eventually resulted from that vision as unnecessarily conservative and orthodox. Particularly serious, according to Scott, was the Plan's failure to come to grips with fundamental economic and social issues, most notably, housing for low-income groups.<sup>10</sup>

But Scott did not underestimate the impact of the Plan. He noted the conclusion of Melvin Webber that the Plan offered 'the first product of a "systems approach" to urban transportation planning in the United States.'<sup>11</sup> Scott also noted the important events connected with the Plan that led to the establishment of the first school of instruction in city planning, established at Harvard in 1929.<sup>12</sup> But the Plan's actual impact on the physical shape of the New York metropolitan region was not elaborated by Scott. He noted simply that 'much of the plan was translated into reality, with initial successes greatest in highway and railroad improvements and in the expansion of the regional park system.'<sup>13</sup>

Harvey A. Kantor provided us with an outline of the origins of the Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs and a useful biographical sketch of Charles Norton, the initiator of the Plan.<sup>14</sup> Kantor concluded that the Plan was significant for urban planning history not only for its sheer size, but for its consequences for the growth of the New York area. Kantor credited the Plan with furthering urban congestion because it 'in effect planned *for* growth rather than attempting to direct it in any way.' He suggested that through emphasis on the private automobile as the major means of transportation, mass transit was relegated to a secondary role. Finally, in a more positive vein, Kantor concluded that the Plan was an early promoter of the concept of regionalism. Thus, like Lubove and Scott, he assessed the record of the Plan's accomplishments as a mixed one, in which the Plan itself was defective, but

the larger concepts it embodied and its organizational legacies were tangible and progressive contributions.<sup>15</sup>

More recent critics, such as Jason Epstein, Robert Fitch and Michael Heiman, have attributed the decline in New York's relative status to the impact of the Plan, charging that it was responsible for the departure of New York City's manufacturing sector and subsequent economic distress – a charge others have challenged.<sup>16</sup> Other analysts, such as Jameson Doig, have argued that the Plan was largely irrelevant and had relatively little direct impact on the New York Region.<sup>17</sup> Whatever its effect on the physical shape of the Region, the importance of the Regional Plan in the evolution of the planning tradition in the United States has generally been acknowledged by scholars writing in the field.

The broad outlines of criticism of the Plan have been sketched and a number of assessments have been made. But the details on the canvas are hazy and their significance ambiguous. The present work seeks to clarify matters. Drawing on records and files of the Committee on the Regional Plan, it has been possible to determine the steps through which the Plan evolved. The historical record of the making of the Plan, set in the context of the emergence of planning in New York, is laid out in some detail in the pages that follow. It makes for a fascinating history.

More is required than historical fact, however, to assess the significance and place of the Plan in American urban social history. The Plan should be viewed as part of a larger reform movement, and its sponsors and guiding spirits were connected with a number of related activities concerned with governmental efficiency and societal integration. Indeed, there is a thread of reform continuity here which links the regional planning movement through a few families and individuals to the pre-Civil War abolitionist movement, and, later, to the establishment of the Federal Reserve System, the American Red Cross, and the Institute of Governmental Research (which subsequently merged with another institute to become the present-day Brookings Institution).

The Regional Plan was published in the inter-war period, but its origins lay in the Progressive Era, those formative years between 1890 and 1917, during which America reached urban and industrial maturity, and so many of our political and economic structures came to seem settled business. Social and economic historians have sought in the Progressive Era the roots of our present national domestic condition. While historians writing in the period between the two World Wars, such as Harold Faulkner, accepted the Progressive reforms at face value as the fruits of a successful fight between the citizenry and the trusts, later interpreters such as Eric F. Goldman, Richard Hofstadter, and Robert H. Wiebe reached a somewhat different conclusion: that the chief beneficiary of Progressive reform and its aftermath was corporate business.<sup>18</sup> This conclusion was presented, however, without normative

judgments as to whether this outcome was particularly good or bad as far as democratic processes were concerned, but rather was viewed as the inevitable consequence of the growth in the scale of business, technology, and population.

Later historians agreeing with the conclusion that big business promoted and reaped the benefits of reform have argued that the consequent loss of representative democracy was not inevitable, that America had a choice between a more responsive form of industrial democracy and what ultimately evolved: a centralized tri-partism among big business, big government, and big labour, with the business group dominant. This is the argument of Gabriel Kolko and James Weinstein, among others.<sup>19</sup>

Among political scientists a similar re-examination occurred, which, though not specifically addressed to the Progressive period, has relevance here. The enduring debate between pluralists, such as Robert Dahl and Nelson Polsby, and those who subscribed to a theory of elites, such as the late C. Wright Mills and Floyd Hunter, subsided some time ago.<sup>20</sup> Few would now argue that elites do not exist. Nor would many argue that single, monolithic elites dominate the process of political decision at either national or metropolitan levels. The debate now centers on two more substantial questions: how do political decisions get made in an arena characterized by a multiplicity of sometimes competing, sometimes cooperating elites? And secondly, what are the ethical issues raised by reliance on a system of interacting elites? In other words, can such a system be regarded as legitimate in terms of a democratic ideal?

A later group of political scientists, including Peter Bachrach and T.B. Bottomore, sharply challenged the pluralist argument on the basis of ethics rather than process. Bachrach, while implicitly accepting pluralist arguments, argued that American political decision-making can be characterized as democratic elitism, elite because decision-making is concentrated among a number of small powerful groups, and nominally democratic because it is premised on the notion of equality of circulation into elites, a concept originating in the work of Vilfredo Pareto. Bachrach's argument holds that equality, to be ethical, requires equality in the sharing of power, not merely in the opportunity to become powerful at the expense of others. Bottomore's thesis is similar.<sup>21</sup>

While it would be simplistic to try to condense this stream of social criticism into a brief summary, a number of recurrent themes stand out. (1) Western industrial society has been dominated by a drive toward the centralization of power with a resultant diminution of the power vested in sub-groups. (2) The major thrust of development has been towards order, uniformity, and unity at the expense of democracy and equality. (3) This thrust has been characterized by a consequent move toward non-legislative control. (4) There has been an increasing separation of the functional and

moral realms. (5) Social scientists have with varying degrees of awareness tended to reinforce the prevailing distribution of social power and have been guilty of reification, empty empiricism, scientism, and technicism.

It is not surprising then that social historians such as Kolko and Weinstein attempted to find the roots of these contemporary tendencies in the American past, and particularly in the formative years of industrial organization in the Progressive era. That they have emerged with unambiguous indictments, unlike their predecessors, is to be expected. Their basic argument is with the distribution of power in an industrial society, and the Progressive era clearly concentrated power. Certainly this was true at the national level. Kolko, for one, contended in his study of the reorganization of banking that the assumption of regulatory power by the national government from the states weakened responsiveness to local needs and control. He charged that state banks were not as inefficient and unstable as the Progressives believed, were more keenly aware of local conditions, and more competitive than the nationally-organized financial system created through progressive reform.<sup>22</sup> This argument has particular relevance to the present study. The thrust toward metropolitan regionalism in the 1910s and 1920s paralleled that towards national organization. The arguments that Kolko made for the national level should therefore find support at the metropolitan level. This should especially be true in the New York Metropolitan Region, where many of the wealthy regionalists were the very same individuals instrumental in achieving national banking reform through the creation of the Federal Reserve System. Elihu Root, Charles Norton, and Frederic Delano stand out, but there were others as well.

There is, of course, an apparent inconsistency that must be satisfied before the Kolko thesis concerning national reform can be said to hold for metropolitan reform. If the Progressive thrust was toward national concentration, how then can we explain the regionalists' desire to strengthen planning at the metropolitan level? The facts presented in this study show that there is little inconsistency. A primary motivation behind metropolitan planning in New York was a desire to rationalize the development of the Port of New York, a national as much as a regional goal. The creation of a stable climate for business was the primary aim both of the regionalists and of the national reformers. Concern for the welfare needs of the population was an enunciated but clearly secondary motive.

This is not to say that the metropolitan planners did not have worthy objectives. It would be grossly unjust to characterize them as self-serving manipulators. They accomplished much of value, particularly in the acquisition of open space. They prided themselves on being both idealists and realists, claiming that they could not hope to make over society but only improve things incrementally. But in the end they did help remake society by

inadvertently reinforcing the latent tendencies of an urbanizing society to concentrate power in the absence of institutions to control that power.

It would be an error, however, to credit the regionalists with more power than they actually possessed. The emergence of metropolitan areas at the beginning of the twentieth century created a political vacuum which a number of groups came forward to fill, the most noteworthy in the New York area being the Port of New York Authority and Robert Moses, both drawing their power from the state rather than from local or regional sources. The regionalists worked to influence these potential competitors and the conflicts that arose among them were not over fundamental issues – there was substantial agreement here – but over detailed matters of how to achieve objectives held in common. In the end, however, it was the Port Authority and Moses who made the important decisions, not the foundation-supported regional planning groups.

It is perhaps a moot point to ask whether there were real alternatives possible for the organization of metropolitan society in the first decades of the century. If there were they certainly were not perceived by the regionalists. And it is not at all certain, had the regionalists not appeared on the scene, that other, less centralized entities could have filled the power vacuum. Socialist and labor groups offered no alternative visions of the possible re-organization of urban areas. They were much too concerned with the bread and butter issues of daily life to think about the possibilities of the future. And the political machines of the cities were typically regarded as corrupt or self-serving, and indeed, many were, though some have argued that the machines were more responsive to the needs of the masses than were the well-meaning but aloof reformers. The alternatives to existing political organization seemed limited to citizens' groups and independent commissions and authorities, and both approaches were used with varying results.

The two central ideas of the regionalists were metropolitanism and comprehensiveness. How appropriate were these notions as origin points for policy-making? Were there really any region-wide metropolitan problems or merely aggregates of local problems potentially resolvable at the local level? What was meant by comprehensiveness? Was it simply a cover for special interests thirsting for power but hoping to appear value-neutral?

By 1920 there were indeed problems which could be called regional in scope. These were largely in the areas of transportation and recreation. But there were also serious local problems with important regional implications, such as the provision of decent housing for workers, which the regionalists chose to ignore because their scope was already too diffuse and because their *status-quo* ideology could not embrace radical innovation. The metropolitan regionalists' definition of comprehensiveness was, as a result, rather narrow and abstract.

None of the foregoing gainsays the contributions the regionalists made to

an understanding of urban phenomena and to the betterment of the regions they attempted to mold. There *were* real achievements. The Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs was a pivot point in the development of the planning tradition in the United States. Well-financed by the Russell Sage Foundation, the project drew together some of the best minds of the time, such as Edward M. Bassett, the lawyer who originated zoning, the economist Robert Murray Haig, Nelson P. Lewis, the engineer, and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., the landscape architect. The work they did together in applying their disciplines to the problems of an earlier 'urban crisis' laid the ground-work for subsequent progress in population projection technique, urban economic analysis (particularly economic base theory), the legal basis of zoning, and transportation engineering. And both the profession of planning and planning education in the universities were greatly influenced by the experiences of these early researchers.

Many of the proposals of the Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs were realized, in contrast to the fate that befell other metropolitan planning efforts such as in Philadelphia and Los Angeles. Secrets of success in the implementation of plans, no matter from what era, should be highly valued. It would be illuminating to know just what ingredients were required to convert plans into realities – and at what price. The key questions then were what impact did the Regional Plan have and how was that impact realized? But there are important subsidiary questions as well.

Though in the 1920s social conditions and the technological setting were clearly different from what currently prevails (more radically changed than the early planners anticipated), the planners and the policy-makers of that era faced issues much like those which concern us today. The literature of the policy sciences continues to be dominated by such questions suggested by these early planners as:

- How does technical information enter and shape the decision process?
- What are the roles of technical elites in policy formulation, and what power do they possess by virtue of their expertise and reputation?
- Where does political power reside in communities, how is it employed, and how is it identified?
- Whose values are invoked in the making of public policy, and how can these values be identified?

The current planning literature contains related questions:

- What issues, elements, sectors or functions should metropolitan-scale planning properly be concerned with?
- How are alternative metropolitan plans and policies to be evaluated?
- How are the economic issues of externality and the social discounting of the future to be accommodated in the formation of public plans and policy?

- How should planning activity respond to risk and uncertainty?
- What are the virtues, if any, of the holistic, comprehensive approach which has characterized the ideology if not the practice of planning?
- What effects do plans as imageable documents have on the making of public policy?
- What is the expectable viable lifetime of regional planning proposals?
- What levels of specificity are appropriate for regional planning policies?

All of these questions currently confront contemporary urban policy-makers. And they can, with profit, also be addressed to the past, as this study attempts to do.

There are those who reject the usefulness of the past as a source of analogs for the future, and, strictly speaking, they are correct.<sup>23</sup> Too many variables are at work for the past to repeat itself exactly. Even so, all anticipations of the future derive in the end from past experience. History is a rich source of clues and suggestions to guide present behaviour. Given the present parlous state of our urban areas, we can use whatever help we can find. As E. H. Carr has put it, 'history should be a dialogue between the events of the past and progressively emerging future ends.'<sup>24</sup> This study is an attempt to conduct such a dialogue.

The events surrounding the making of the Regional Plan of New York can only be comprehended and analyzed within the context of its place and its time. Chapters 2 and 3 help establish that context. Chapter 2 briefly summarizes the evolution of urban development in New York and its surroundings prior to the Regional Plan. Chapter 3 is a description and analysis of the major attempts by reformers to plan and control the physical growth and development of the New York Region. Out of these efforts a distinctive planning tradition emerged. The Regional Plan of New York represented both a continuation of this tradition and an attempt to consolidate previous plans into a single grand scheme.

Chapter 4 focuses on the events leading up to the decision to undertake the Plan and the relationship of the Regional Plan of New York to the Plan of Chicago. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 describe and analyze the process by which the Regional Plan was made and the substantive proposals contained in it. Chapter 8 comprises three case studies of significant development decisions made while the Plan was in preparation. The case studies shed light on the nature of the political relationships between the Regional Plan Committee and the principal regional decision-makers, the Port of New York Authority, Robert Moses, and the City of New York.

Chapters 9 and 10 analyze the extent to which the Plan was carried out and the reasons for its successes and failures. Chapter 11, the concluding chapter, presents a theory of reform and evaluates the Plan in terms of its distribution of social and economic benefits. Tentative hypotheses for a theory of planning reform behaviour are presented.

## NOTES

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# THE MAKING OF THE NEW YORK METROPOLITAN REGION

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## URBAN BEGINNINGS

At the beginning of the nineteenth century there was, of course, no New York urban region but simply a small, compact mercantile city of 60,000 people mostly clustered in a square mile at the southern tip of Manhattan Island. Beyond the edge of the city in the counties surrounding Manhattan lay smaller harborside cities and a vast agricultural hinterland of towns, villages and farms with a total population of nearly 300,000 people, most of whom had only indirect ties to the City. The daily life of New York City was for the most part self-contained and independent of that of the numerous towns and villages in the surrounding area. What intercourse occurred between settlements was mostly over water routes, land travel being slow and difficult.

*Table 2.1.* Population of Manhattan, New York City and the New York Metropolitan Region, 1800 to 1920

	<i>Manhattan</i>	<i>New York City<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>New York Metropolitan Region<sup>b</sup></i>
1800	60,515	79,216	291,186
1810	96,515	119,734	364,885
1820	123,706	152,056	424,654
1830	202,589	247,278	551,333
1840	312,710	391,114	756,860
1850	515,547	696,115	1,163,141
1860	813,669	1,174,779	1,835,176
1870	942,292	1,478,103	2,374,576
1880	1,164,673	1,911,698	3,026,367
1890	1,441,216	2,507,414	3,966,378
1900	1,850,093	3,437,202	5,384,734
1910	2,331,542	4,766,883	7,466,942
1920	2,284,103	5,620,048	8,979,055

(a) The area of the present five boroughs.

(b) As defined in 1921 by the Committee on the Regional Plan comprising all or parts of twenty-two counties in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut.

*Source:* Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs (1929) *Regional Committee Survey, Vol. II. Population, Land Values and Government.* New York: Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs p. 71.

The New York of 1800 was above all a pedestrian's city. From the center of settlement just south of City Hall one could walk to almost any point in less than ten minutes. The street patterns inherited from the Dutch and English were laid out, not by meandering cows, as legend has it, but in logical fashion parallel to the waterfronts which gave the town its livelihood. Adjacent to the waterfronts were located the various wholesale markets and exchanges – the seeds of the future mercantile and financial success of the City. The real center of civic and social life, however, was to be found not on the water, but in the heart of the settlement, along Broadway, the southern terminus of the Boston Post Road. Here were clustered the shops, the theater, the hospital, the important public buildings, and, above all, the churches, their tall spires dominating the skyline. Even while moving north over the subsequent years, the heart of the City would continue thereafter to occupy the center of the island, for here would always be the most accessible of places.

#### MID-CENTURY: THE RAILROAD ARRIVES

In the first half of the nineteenth century the eastern seaboard cities turned their attention to the development of the interior. First, turnpikes, then canals and railroads were pushed through mountain gaps to western farmlands. While historians generally agree that New York's pre-eminence among American cities pre-dates the opening in 1825 of the upstate Erie Canal, the canal undoubtedly accelerated the growth of New York.

Several canals were also built in what is now the metropolitan area: the Delaware and Raritan Canal and the Morris Canal in New Jersey, the Delaware and Hudson Canal in New York State, and the Farmington Canal in Connecticut. While several of these carried freight as late as the early twentieth century, their initial promise was never fulfilled, owing to the almost concurrent appearance of the faster, more versatile railroads.

For passenger travel, the steamboat was the fastest, cheapest, most popular mode in the period between 1830 and 1860. But the railroad, which made its first appearance in the New York area in the 1830s, overtook the steamboat's supremacy by the eve of the Civil War.

The rapid growth of New York City and of the twin harborside cities of Brooklyn and Williamsburgh immediately after 1850 was due to their advantageous situations for waterborne commerce, which favored the ice-free East River over the Hudson. But it was the railroad that opened up for the urban area around the port a true hinterland, pulling into its orbit outlying centers such as Hempstead, Paterson, and White Plains. Instantaneously, the overland travel time to points newly linked to New York by rail was cut to almost a fourth of what it had been. It became faster, by 1850, to travel by rail and ferry from lower Manhattan to Hempstead than by horse from lower Manhattan to the vicinity that was about to become Central Park.

This great breakthrough in urban accessibility was not lost on those city dwellers who sought and had the means to find residential retreats in the open countryside near the rail lines. In 1852, some twelve miles from Manhattan, Llewellyn Park was laid out by a New York businessman in Orange, New Jersey, near the tracks of the Morris and Essex Railroad. It was probably the first American suburb spawned by a railroad.<sup>1</sup>

The railroads for the most part chose routes through the open countryside, bypassing the old turnpike crossroad settlements. The objective of the new lines was to be the first to link New York to distant cities in Upstate New York and in the expanding Midwest. Little concern was given to serving the smaller towns surrounding New York City. Newark, Elizabeth, Paterson, New Brunswick, Bridgeport, Jamaica, and a few others were considered important enough to receive the benefits (and the problems) of rail lines slashed through their centers. Hempstead, bypassed by the main progenitor company of the present Long Island Railroad, was tied in by means of a branch spur. Princeton and several other smaller towns were similarly served. Thus, by the eve of the Civil War the future destinies of the outlying towns were sorted out between haves and have-nots.

River valleys usually provided the easiest routes for new rail lines. Crossing the rivers was another matter. The waters surrounding Manhattan Island, so essential to the early development of the city, became barriers in the early years of rail development. Routes from the south and the west terminated at the western shore of the Hudson, requiring elaborate ferrying arrangements for the trip to Manhattan. By 1852 only two routes, both from the north, had been able to penetrate the developed part of the city to terminals not far from City Hall. In 1851 the New York and Hudson Railroad began operations over a right-of-way that hugged the eastern shore of the Hudson, and in 1852 the New York and Harlem Railroad occupied rights-of-way along Fourth Avenue. Both lines offered local passenger service between lower Manhattan and points further north on the Island, as well as to more distant places outside the city.

By 1850 population growth had pushed Manhattan's urban development north to about 23rd Street along the lines of a rigid gridiron of streets laid out by a State Commission in 1811, establishing a physical pattern that was followed in cities across the country. The Commissioners' Plan, as it came to be known, intended that Broadway should be obliterated north of Canal Street. But the tenacious ancient spine of the city continued to attract development and was too well established to be denied.

Three important concentrations of commercial and institutional activities had emerged along Broadway by 1850, the most important of which was the cluster just north of the City Hall area. Here were located the city's most important shops, cultural activities, schools, city government, and the southernmost terminals of the two rail lines leading to the north. A smaller group

of mercantile, customs and other port-related activities remained clustered near the Battery.

Long before 1850, the city had ceased to be traversable from one end to the other on foot. By mid-century a full hour was required to walk to the Battery from the fashionable new residential edge of the city north of 23rd Street. The city responded to its growth with improved north-south transportation. The world's first horse cars on tracks began operation in 1832, sharing the route of the New York and Harlem Railroad. A few years later steam replaced horse power on this route. But horse car operations continued to expand and by the middle of the century lines had been established on Third, Fourth, and Sixth Avenues.

Improved accessibility from the new residential areas to the older centers in south Manhattan did not preclude the emergence of an important new business cluster just north of Cooper Square. A center developed at this point because of its proximity to stations of the steam rail line. The prestige and traffic of Broadway also played a role. Moreover, Cooper Square was sufficiently far from the cluster around City Hall not to have to compete with that older center for the newly developed market area within ten minutes' walking time. There is also some evidence that land was held vacant in this area for some time after all around it had been developed for residence. These factors – centrality to an emerging market, accessibility to older established central points, and the availability of vacant land – were the indispensable conditions required for the appearance of new centers.

## THE REGION EMERGES

The half-century between 1850 and 1900 saw an unprecedented rate of technological, economic, and social change in the large urban centers of the world. It is not necessary to describe the well-chronicled progression of revolutionary mechanical and electrical inventions, the rise of corporate capitalism, the waves of immigration from Europe. All worked to change the rural nation of 1850 into an urban nation by 1900, with New York its foremost metropolis. Historians have called the latter part of the nineteenth century the period of 'the rise of the city.'<sup>2</sup> But this was also the period when the broad outlines of the metropolitan region began to appear. Between 1850 and 1900 the population of the metropolitan area quadrupled – from 1.6 million to 6.2 million. Between 1860 and 1900, 120 square miles of land were developed for urban uses, more than three times the area that had been urbanized in 1850.

The physical growth of the Region in this period was shaped by three powerful transportation forces: the railroad, street railways, and, in New York City, elevated rapid transit. The railroad opened up large quantities of raw land for residential development in the vicinity of stations and engen-

dered concentrations of commercial development at the major terminal points in outlying areas. The street car and elevated rapid transit had the same effect on a local scale.

The railroads greatly influenced the Region's response to population growth. Two phenomena were particularly evident: the center of urban gravity in the Region shifted westward towards New Jersey; and satellite towns grew along the lines radiating from the core cities around the harbor, establishing corridors of development still important today.

The shift of the Region's center of gravity westward was a response to the rail accessibility advantage with which cities west of the Hudson were endowed. Freight from Manhattan and Brooklyn destined for points west and south had to be floated across the harbor to rail heads on the Jersey side, a costly inconvenience that industry tended to avoid by locating west of the Hudson. Port activities in this period also were drawn westward from their East River orientation to the Hudson shores and the Jersey rail terminals. As a result of the growth in jobs and industries, the New Jersey portion of the Region grew three-and-a-half times in the period between 1860 and 1900, whereas the New York portion grew but two-and-a-half times. The second notable effect of the railroad on physical growth in this period was the emergence of satellite cities and towns along the rail lines radiating from the center of the Region (figure 2.1). Strings of urban settlements grew around the major stations of the principal rail lines, particularly those built along the Connecticut shore, the south and north shores of Long Island, south of the Watchung ridges, and along the main line to Philadelphia in New Jersey. While a few of these cities and towns developed as service and commercial centers for local populations who commuted to Manhattan and Newark, most were relatively independent places such as Bridgeport, Danbury, and Paterson, old towns expanded around industrial activities newly established or spun off from the increasingly congested core cities.

Most of the industrial growth in the core cities occupied sites along waterfronts in order to be near the many rail lines which had taken water or riverfront rights-of-way so as to serve extant industry originally oriented to shipping or water power. Water routes were also selected because they made for the easy grades railroads require through areas of rough terrain. In urban areas residences and institutions retreated from the amenities of the water's edge, yielding to economic pressure and repelled by the noise and nuisance of industry.

The impact of the railroad on regional development was duplicated on a smaller scale in and around the Region's cities and larger towns by the development of street car systems. By the turn of the century, every important outlying city and town had several trolley lines radiating from its downtown to its outskirts. A few lines reached far out into the open countryside to recreation areas of new residential subdivisions in which the traction compa-

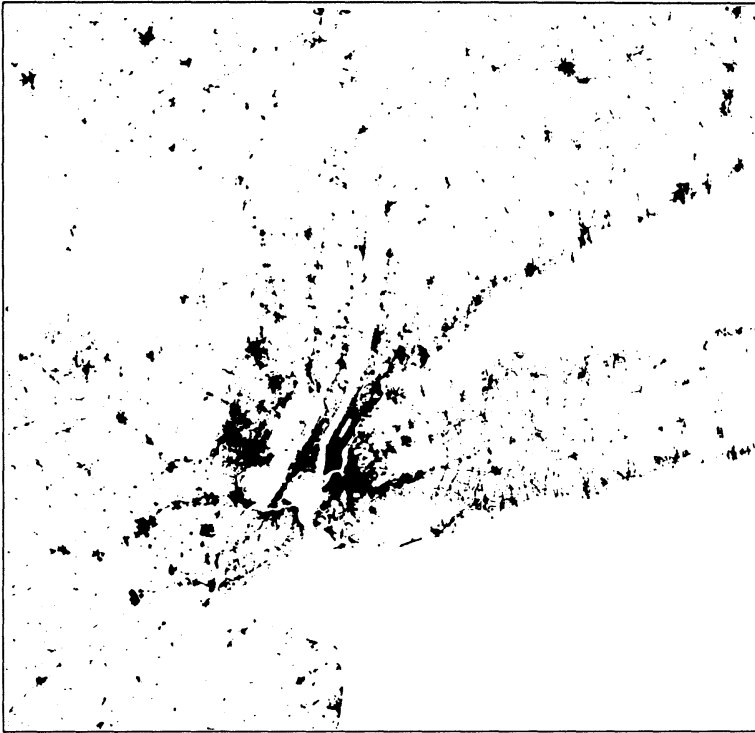
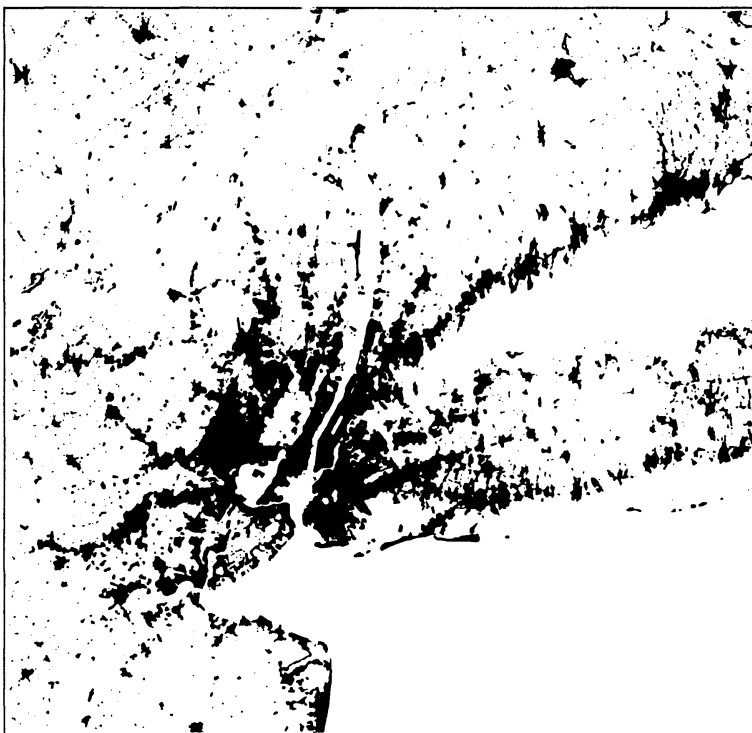


Figure 2.1. Urbanized land, 1900. (Source: Regional Plan Association)

nies frequently had an interest. The lines were built to serve existing development but inevitably they shaped new growth. New subdivisions grew up within walking distance of the major routes. On either side of the most important lines long strings of local shops were built to serve the new neighborhoods. Street car track was laid in the Region's cities at a high rate from 1860 to 1900. The peak rate occurred between 1890 and 1900, spurred by the replacement of horse power with steam and electric power in the late 1880s. Cable cars were first used in Manhattan in 1885 and electric trolleys in 1887.

While the railroad made possible the growth of industrial activities in decentralized cities, the street car opened up land in those cities for workers' housing. While little change in the Region's residential density had occurred between 1820 and 1860, so much new land was opened up by street car lines that by 1900 average residential density in the Region was two-thirds of what it had been in 1860, even while the Region's population was tripling over that period.

Just as workers were freed by the street car from the need to be within walking distance of their factory jobs, factories were freed from the need to



*Figure 2.2.* Urbanized land, 1935. (Source: Regional Plan Association)

be near workers' housing. New plants could bypass older industrial areas in the immediate vicinity of the old downtown in favor of industrial districts somewhat removed from the center.

Though the street car spurred the spread of homes and factories, it had the opposite effect on retail and office activities. Most of the Region's important downtowns outside Manhattan grew rapidly in the street car era. The appearance of downtown department stores in the 1870s and 1880s in such places as Newark, Brooklyn, Elizabeth, Bridgeport, Newburgh, White Plains, and other such centers can be traced to the development of radial street car systems which opened up new markets and focused them on downtown. Local offices and banks followed a similar pattern.

In 1850 half of the Region's population lived on Manhattan Island. By 1900, less than a third of the population lived there. However, the consolidation of Greater New York, effected under the Charter of 1897, united Brooklyn, Queens, and Richmond with Manhattan and the Bronx and brought 3.4 million of the Region's 5.4 million people under a single New York City government, making New York the world's largest city at the time.<sup>3</sup> The consolidation set the stage for subsequent large-scale extension of the rapid