

An excerpt from

The Third City

Chicago and American Urbanism

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Chicago is the most self-conscious of cities. In its origins it represented the dream of New York-based capital, a terminus for Great Lakes-borne commerce that would develop, in its own right, into the most formidable metropolis of the mid-continent. In the aftermath of the Great Fire of 1871, the city's army of ambitious capitalists rebuilt it in a fashion that was grander than in its previous, short life as a frontier depot. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, the city's civic leadership was sufficiently self-assured to win for Chicago designation as host of the World's Columbian Exposition, an event commemorating Columbus's voyages to America at the end of the fifteenth century. To the dismay of one of the city's great artists, the architect Louis Sullivan, the Columbian Exposition's civic sponsors and committee of designers were not sufficiently self-assured to use the exhibition site to present a path-defining vision of city form and human settlement. Instead, the classically inspired, mammoth-scaled White City on the south lakefront seemed to embody the parvenu's quest for respect through emulation of his social betters.

Chicago's self-consciousness is not simply a matter of maturing in the shadows of older, more worldly cities. In the early decades of the twentieth century, sociologists at the University of Chicago, led by a former journalist, Robert Park, embarked on a twofold quest to map the neighborhoods, people, and social intricacies of the city, and, in so doing, perfect a set of theories and analytical tools that could be applied to cities and urban development wherever metropolises were found. The title of what is probably Park's most influential piece of writing, *The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment* (1925), perfectly captures his ambitions for the nascent field of urban sociology: systematic investigation of human action in what was at that time presumed to be the emergent, typically behavior-shaping form of human habitation.

Though the idea of scientific neutrality ruled the theorizing and observational methodologies of the early Chicago school sociologists, neutrality and what might be presumed as its associated values—even-tempered social discourse and the rational application of means to ends—were hardly characteristic of the city that was their object of study. The prairie depot of the 1830s and 1840s had grown to a metropolis of one million by 1890, and two million additional residents would be added to the city's streets, workplaces, and homes by the onset of the Great Depression. Chicago was a sprawling, vibrant industrial center, whose multinational population—Irish, German, Scandinavian,

Polish, Italian, and a dozen smaller immigrant flows from southern and eastern Europe—on the best of days managed to coexist in an economically productive fashion, but on many bad days heeded the exhortations of ethnocentric political leaders and navigated the city's streets using a variety of means to avoid its myriad "others," or simply fell into intercommunal violence. The subject matter and titles of the early Chicago school of sociology monographs are direct evocations of this on-the-street social milieu: *The Gang* (1927), *The Ghetto* (1929), and *The Natural History of a Delinquent Career* (1931).

Like many American cities of the early twentieth century, Chicago was the site of a deep-seated "civic war," pitting an older, largely Yankee-descended institutional leadership against an emergent, recently immigrant population of small proprietors, factory hands, neighborhood ethnic "nationalists," and upward-striving politicians. The early urban sociologists were poised at the intersection of Chicago's clashing histories and worldviews, sharing with the retreating Yankees a quality of temperament and commitment to social amelioration while avidly recording the transgressions of the city's rising ethnic leadership and rank and file. At this point in Chicago's development there had emerged a clear divide between what might be called the normative city—a setting in which the execution of professionally ordained planning principles and the inculcation of citizenly virtues were presumed to be achievable—and the empirical city—a wild, unkempt place whose effect on its residents was just as likely to be demoralizing as salubrious.

In the 1920s, the empirical Chicago asserted itself in a powerful fashion. The era of Prohibition coincided with the emergence of a complex underground economy devoted to satisfying the local craving for alcohol. Gangland figures found ready allies in Chicago's political parties, whose operatives had long joined electioneering and governance to economic self-aggrandizement. During this decade the city's Republican Party, led by the provocatively uncouth William Hale Thompson, established a standard of citywide venality and local favor-mongering on par with the misdeeds of any of the city's wrong-thinking, Catholic-leaning Democratic Party factions. In the wake of Thompson's three terms as mayor, the Cook County Democratic machine emerged and seemingly rendered permanent the scheming, look-out-for-Number One-style of politics that a generation previously had been the worst fear of the city's Yankees.

Gang wars, intense ethnic and then racial competition, a politics defined by greed and aiming no higher than perpetuation in office: such was the Chicago that persisted in the early years following World War II. It was the particular brilliance of Richard J. Daley, Chicago's mayor from 1955 to 1976, to seize control of the empirical city and within a decade redefine the venal as the virtuous. Though Daley probably did not invent the expression, "good politics is good government" was the hallmark of at least the first decade of his mayoralty. Through his ability to centralize the Cook County Democratic Party and reinforce his party domination via the skillful distribution of government jobs, contracts, and various associated favors, Daley gave new life to the Democratic machine and achieved a considerable degree of national acclaim for his city.

Nevertheless, Daley's Democratic machine of the 1950s and early 1960s foundered on the same shoals that broke the post-World War II civic calm of so many American cities: the flight of middle-class residents to the suburbs, the relocation of major employers to the suburbs and beyond, a vigorous local civil rights movement, and—growing from the confluence of the three preceding trends—a festering interracial quarrel over jobs and residential space. Chicago of the late 1960s was a city in turmoil, in part due to the “touching down” of national forces, such as Martin Luther King Jr.'s housing campaign of 1966 and 1967, and in part due to the localized agonies associated with rapid, apparently ceaseless neighborhood racial transition. In quick succession, disasters such as the April 1968 West Side riots following King's assassination in Memphis, Tennessee, the August 1968 Democratic National Convention disturbances, and the Black Panther murders of December 1969 forced upon Chicagoans a new and heretofore uncharacteristic variety of self-consciousness. Daley's “city that works” had suddenly crashed. In its place was a racially divided, economically crippled emblem of the soon-to-be-dubbed Rust Belt. Moreover, the attitudes expressed by Daley and his supporters—as they attempted to explain what had befallen Chicago—revealed a city leadership that was deeply provincial, and as such, seemingly incapable of comprehending the late twentieth century and its challenges.

Here is a personal anecdote that speaks—even in the face of these unwelcome developments—to the reach of the Richard J. Daley legend. Many years ago, and long before I became a Chicagoan, I found myself, or possibly had maneuvered to situate myself, in an undergraduate dormitory room with a half-dozen or so acquaintances. One of my company had grown up in the Chicago suburbs, and to my considerable surprise—even as Jimi Hendrix's “All Along the Watchtower” surged from the stereo speakers—proclaimed that the city's civil unrest of the previous weeks and months was in no way the doing of Mayor Daley. Rather, outside agitators had descended on Chicago, and what had occurred in April and August of 1968 was entirely their handiwork. At the time I was amazed at what I took to be my acquaintance's false consciousness. To this day, in the minds of many older Chicagoans, the image of Richard J. Daley in his political prime remains alive and unblemished by subsequent reflection.

Chicago's long 1960s climaxed in 1983 with Harold Washington's election as mayor. An African American and former Daley machine operative, Washington abandoned the regular Democratic Party as a member of the Illinois state legislature in the 1970s. He was drawn into the 1983 mayoral race by a coalition of black and neighborhood activists whose immediate target was the incumbent mayor, Jane Byrne, but whose dissatisfactions reached back to the Richard J. Daley era. Washington, for his part, assembled an administration that sought to undercut the official Democratic Party, reinvigorate city government with an infusion of neighborhood organization veterans and academic experts, and chart an innovative policy course emphasizing public accountability, industrial retention, and neighborhood development. The response of holdover Democratic Party loyalists in the City Council and elsewhere in the city and Cook County governments was a poisonous obstructionism. Their call to arms was the incompetence supposedly demonstrated by the interlopers (often, but far from exclusively, African Americans) who had taken over the city government's executive

branch. Amidst the rekindled racial antagonisms of the mid-1980s, a local civic organization issued a report asserting that the longstanding, purportedly effective working relationship among the city's political, business, and civic elites had been broken, and further wondered, at what cost to the city at large? Over the next few years Chicago's new round of civic wars earned it the designation "Beirut by the Lake," a label reflecting Chicagoans' fears of inextricable racial/ethnic polarization coupled with a physically devastated cityscape.

And yet, the 1980s in Chicago are also frequently recalled as a time of elevated civic engagement—voting in municipal elections, for instance, increased dramatically—or, in parallel fashion, as the last time local politics were interesting. Some of this interesting upheaval was, of course, repellent, such as the street-corner fistfights so many of us observed on election day 1983. On the other hand, a Chicago comedian, Aaron Freeman, made his reputation by developing a skit in which the Star Wars principals Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader were embodied by Harold Washington and his chief City Council critic, Alderman Edward Vrdolyak. Across Chicago, citizens were entertained as well as enraged by this era's political strife. The art of political maneuvering is as central to Chicagoans' sense of their city as is pride in its commercial architecture. In retrospect, the Washington mayoralty increasingly looks like the apotheosis of a particular form of political/civic culture that is unlikely ever to return.

The shading of Chicago's self-consciousness has brightened in the last fifteen years. Another Daley—the great man's son, Richard M.—holds the mayoralty, and a burst of commercial and residential development has filled in many of the embarrassing holes that had been punched through the city's physical fabric by the consolidation of railroad operations, the departure of industry, and housing abandonment. Like his father, as well as most mayors of note, Richard M. Daley is a great advocate of public works. In his two decades as chief executive, the younger Daley has rolled out a series of major physical projects: Millennium Park in the northwest corner of downtown Grant Park; the consolidation of a "Museum Campus" for the Field Museum of Natural History, the Shedd Aquarium, and the Adler Planetarium; and just south of the Field Museum, the futuristically recast Soldier Field, home of the Chicago Bears professional football franchise. For now, I will cut short the cataloging of Mayor Daley's public works accomplishments; in a subsequent chapter I examine in detail what might be the most consequential of all of Richard M. Daley's public works initiatives, the top-to-bottom reconstruction of the city's public housing developments. The impacts of Richard M. Daley's physical reshaping of central Chicago are such that sociologist Terry Nichols Clark of the University of Chicago has argued that the provision of urban amenities, if skillfully implemented, can become a crucial lever in stimulating a new era of central city growth both in Chicago and other American cities.

As one can readily enough infer from Clark's premise, contemporary Chicago is less subject than it was twenty years ago to the self-consciousness of a Rust Belt city anticipating its demise. The 1990s were the City of Chicago's first decade of population increase since the 1940s. Nevertheless, even in the face of the mounting good news indicating an end-of-century turnaround in the city's fortunes, for many of the

commentators on Chicago's local affairs there is a reluctance to give up its identity as a rough and tumble, political boss-dominated city. Consider, for example, this description of Chicago's political culture—penned in the early days of Richard M. Daley's mayoralty:

[W]e are Chicagoans, and therefore prey to atavistic impulses. Ours is perhaps the only major city in the country that still expects its mayors to be tribal chieftains. Richard J. Daley was such a man, and so was Harold Washington. They were natural leaders, with followers who were loyal to the point of fanaticism. They would have run things even in a primitive society, although Lord knows they don't come much more primitive than Chicago.

I grant the author of this commentary, journalist Ed Zotti, the right to compose satire, and in the wake of Chicago's contentious 1980s, "atavism" did seem to persist as an element of the city's political culture. But what I find particularly revealing about this assertion is how it extends the "framing" of Chicago's public life that had emerged at the outset of the twentieth century, when European immigrant hordes seemed to be overrunning the city, when the city's public institutions—at least in the eyes of more apocalyptic reformers—seemed to be tottering before a fall into some variety of tribalism, civil war, or anarchy.

This image of Chicago—a metropolis carved into ethnically defined neighborhood enclaves, its population craving iron-willed political leadership, the game of politics overshadowing the ends of politics—is such a powerful shaper of the city's sense of identity that many of its closest observers have failed to notice that in contemporary Chicago, what I call the "third city," is, in fact, emergent. This third city succeeds the first city, Chicago the sprawling industrial center, whose historical arc ran from the Civil War up to the Great Depression, as well as the second city (not to be confused with A. J. Liebling's portrait of a backward, Potemkin village metropolis fated to a second-class emulation of the nation's metropolitan center, Manhattan), the Rust Belt exemplar of the period from approximately 1950 to 1990. The hold on our collective and individual imaginations that is retained by Chicago's first and second cities is easy enough to understand. Those titans of empirical Chicago—William Hale Thompson, Al Capone, Richard J. Daley, even Jane Addams—negotiated a larger-than-life terrain that was curiously frontier-like in its capacity for producing sudden shifts in human fortune, for visiting prosperity or devastation on the deserving and undeserving alike. There is an awful grandeur to the story of Chicago's first and second cities. For many observers of contemporary Chicago it is tempting to recycle the past as present in a possibly unself-conscious quest to ward off the dread that we have been condemned to live in uninteresting times.

Contemporary Chicago is a tidier place than its first and second manifestations, but it is not less interesting. My aim is to look very closely at this third Chicago and to come to terms with it and its implications. The third city features a revitalized urban core, which at present coexists uncomfortably with a belt of very poor to working-class neighborhoods reaching west and south. The third city is home to a shifting population

mix, including a very large segment drawn from Mexico; a smaller but significant immigrant stream from south and east Asia; a substantial population of middle-class professionals working in corporations, universities, and other “creative class” economic niches; and many thousands of “out” gays and lesbians. The third city is intensely conscious of Chicago’s tempestuous history and erratically protective of the city’s unique built environment. The third city is testing new approaches to neighborhood revitalization and the reform of public institutions.

The third city is also a work in progress, whose story is worth telling in its own right. Yet what makes the emergent Chicago of interest beyond its municipal boundaries, and for an audience in many cities, is once more the quality of self-consciousness animating the changes Chicagoans are bringing to their city. The “New Urbanist” architecture and site-planning characteristic of the Chicago Housing Authority’s newly constructed “mixed-income” developments seeks to restore not just an idealized streetscape but also a particular understanding of neighborhood communalism. Mayor Richard M. Daley, while never directly expressing his ambition, clearly strives to fill the shoes of his determined father even as he portrays himself as an elected leader whose practice of governance somehow does not involve politics! Nevertheless, the current Mayor Daley’s agenda is not simply a sleight of hand.

Bureaucratic transformation—and more fundamentally, the retooling of government services to reach new constituencies and support an evolving mix of business enterprises—is a hallmark of Richard M. Daley governance. Chicago’s municipal government routinely invokes the idea of multiculturalism through its annual sponsorship of myriad neighborhood and ethnic festivals and as it “themes” local commercial strips as Greek, African American, Puerto Rican, or gay. How these willful blendings and distortions of history and how this highly self-conscious effort to shape a new city proceeds, represent a play of ideas and strategies that just might solidify into a new consensus on urbanism, local citizenship, and community formation. Certainly Richard M. Daley, members of his municipal administration, and many of his admirers presume that the contemporary Chicago-in-the-making is a prototype of successful urban reinvention. Closely examining Chicago’s third city thus allows us to consider what

metropolitan life across
North America may

well look like in the coming decades.

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