II

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Delightful moments lightened William Dean Howells's horsecar commute to Boston. "Happy to cling with one foot to the rear platform-steps," he looked "out over the shoulder next to him into fairy-land." The sight of river and bay, meadows and uplands, gave way to the Bunker Hill Monument, "soaring preeminent among the emulous foundry-chimneys," and then to rooftops rising "one above another on the city's three hills, grouping themselves about the State House, and surmounted by its India-rubber dome."

However, the views rarely compensated for the "passions and sufferings" of the "spoiled children of comfort" in the crowded streetcar, "indecorously huddled and jammed together, without regard to age and sex" and "reduced below the level of the most uncomfortable nations of the Old World." The horror existed, Howells reflected, "not only in Boston, but in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, St. Louis, Chicago, and Cincinnati," where "the same victims are thus daily sacrificed." In his existence as a commuter, he detected "our weakness as a public" in suffering the indignities and hardships of a hideous experience day in, day out.¹

Howells's reaction obscured city people's dependence on systems of transportation to ameliorate the isolation of suburbs and residential districts. Streetcars linked various sectors of a divided world, predominantly the place of residence and the place of work. It was technological innovations, from horsecar to subway, rather than architectural forms, that unified the space of the modern city.

Moreover, they complemented the apartment house as the new unit of private space.

This role of public transit grew out of the division of real estate into areas rather strictly segregated by function—one way of structuring the suddenly expanding, large and diverse city. The economics of land value doomed traditional devices for giving the cityscape an exterior unity and shaped the arrangement of space in the modern city. The rapid rate of urbanization precluded a slow ordering of the landscape over a period of gradual expansion and made it difficult to deal with urban space as a totality.

However, forces shaping the modern city—commerce and manufacturing and people's pursuit of wealth in line with their social aspirations, cultural values, and psychic needs—created some regularity in the spatial chaos through land values that fluctuated with a certain degree of predictability. As long as topography permitted, city growth took place in all directions from a downtown business district, but favored those areas specifically suited for warehouses, factories, or residences. Distinct districts sprang up around these subcenters, which might overlap or interlock, but always depended on each other.

Banks and offices occupied the main business center, together with various enterprises serving these sources of financial and administrative control. Their functions and the people they attracted in turn brought newspaper plants and the department stores that gave the business district its downtown atmosphere. Retail shops and wholesale houses located along traffic lines that reached out from the city center to the residences of their customers. At intersections, clusters of stores gave rise to shopping areas that reflected the shifting values of the parcels of real estate caused by their changing function. The location of residences—in midtown enclaves, on the outskirts of the city, or at the fringes of industrial sections—indicated the social status of their inhabitants. Despite the conflicting influences determining land values, from individual caprice blocking the use of a lot to political manipulation of real estate, an early historian of the phenomenon found a "striking unifor-
mity” in the process: self-interest compelled individuals to obey “economic laws.”

The structuring of urban space along changing functions and shifting real estate values was greatly facilitated by a surveying system that divided land into plain rectangular strips. Without concern for topography or aesthetics, this gridiron plan produced straight streets intersecting at right angles. The system appealed to city residents’ preference for rational solutions and scientific methods, as the gridiron had done in other times and places. A practical approach to the age-old task of ordering urban space, the method simplified surveying and facilitated speculation. It absorbed sudden as well as protracted growth because the rectangular layout of the streets extended far beyond the actual city, making possible the sale and resale of lots in advance of settlement, and stimulating the promotion of undeveloped areas. The price that the grid exacted in ugliness appeared small in a strange world where monotony also suggested familiarity.

Philadelphia first demonstrated the utility of checkerboard streets in the English colonies of North America. New York City added to the gridiron system its luster as the great metropolis of the United States at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Its commissioners, appointed to re-order the cityscape, in their report of 1811 opted for “rectilinear and rectangular streets,” on the ground of “plain and simple reflections.” They saw a city “composed principally of the habitations of men” and regarded “strait sided and strait angled houses... the most cheap to build and the most convenient to live in.”

More than the need for housing, the commercial and manufacturing interests that sustained the rise of the modern city were well served by the gridiron system. It accommodated a distinctly modern attitude towards city building that considered nothing permanently fixed but the individual parcels of real estate. These lots enjoyed a life of their own, unrelated to any more general schemes of ordering the cityscape of the type that during these decades shaped European capitals such as Munich, Berlin, London,

Vienna, and, above all, Paris according to royal or imperial designs. Taken singly or in city blocks, the lots carried into city building the spirit and practices of a democracy fostering equal opportunity for those of its members who had the money to enjoy it.

These small parcels of real estate enabled people to make maximum use of property for purposes which changed with their interests. They made city building and re-building an obsession. “All is moving and removing, organizing and disorganizing, building up and tearing down,” one traveler commented in 1849, describing what Walt Whitman had called “The pull-down-and-build-over-again-spirit” a few years earlier. New York “is never the same city for a dozen years altogether,” stated Harper’s Monthly in 1856, identifying one reason why it “is notoriously the largest and the least loved of any of our great cities.” Anyone born there forty years ago “finds nothing, absolutely nothing, of the New York he knew,” the editor emphasized.

The exuberant spirit of change which pervaded all bodies, things, and places thrived on the checkerboard system of streets that directed many enterprises into the rational penetration and financial exploration of the vast urban environment. Real estate as big business backed the grid with the heavy weight of capital and the conservative strength of property. Its speculative market and the construction industry flourished on and sustained this division of the city. The strength of these influences triumphed even in moments when extraordinary circumstances suggested an opportunity to overcome the gridiron design.

At the time of the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906, a plan to re-order a city and a disaster destroying its core almost coincided. In response to an invitation from a group of San Franciscans, the Chicago architect and city planner Daniel H. Burnham had begun in 1904 to draft a plan for their city that envisioned boulevards radiating from a civic center and streets following the contours of hills crowned by parks. However, the city rose again after the earthquake and fire with little regard for the Burnham Plan of the San Francisco Improvement Association.
Long before this, however, the freedom of life in the United States had doomed most attempts to order public space by arranging it according to principles derived from aesthetic considerations, historical examples, or religious beliefs. Deliberately planned urban space, beyond the division into rectangular parcels, appeared rarely, and the examples of Savannah, Washington, D.C., and Salt Lake City stood out boldly. The residents of the modern city, who took Paris as their model of stylish life whenever possible, nevertheless disregarded the practical implications for ordering urban space suggested by the re-making of the French capital under Napoleon III. They recognized neither prince, priest, nor planner as guide. Some of them, however, dismayed by the chaotic scenes that the free use of space produced, did advocate relying on architectural styles to superimpose an exterior visual harmony on the cityscape.

Among them the Neo-Gothic style found various advocates, inspired during the 1830’s and 1840’s by the Neo-Gothic architecture used to revitalize the Church of England and to complete the Cologne cathedral as a symbol of national unity in a Germany divided into many states. Admirers of the Neo-Gothic considered architectural ideas and actual buildings based on medieval Gothic models particularly suited for their purposes. As expressions of a distinctly urban as well as Christian style, imposing Neo-Gothic structures seemed to answer not only the city’s need but also the churches’ search for identification with institutionalized Christianity in a setting where churches were beginning to lose their place as central social institutions.

In the 1840’s, the Cambridge Camden Society, a dominantly Anglican group working to revive the medieval English parish church as part of the Oxford Movement of reform within the Church of England, expanded its activities to the United States. It related the trend toward the Neo-Gothic, which involved moralistic objections to the commercialization of society and the mechanization of production, to ecclesiastical and theological concerns. The body of thought created by the Society concerning the study of church buildings and its functions and arts came to be called “ecclesiology” and the members “ecclesiologists.”

A New York Ecclesiastical Society briefly dedicated itself at mid-century to the spread of ideas about church reform and Neo-Gothic architecture. With that backing, the Gothic Revival left its mark primarily on church buildings, but also motivated the practitioners of secular architecture to think about the influence of their profession on society and about the relation between a building’s function and its appearance. As a result, 60 percent of the house designs published in Godey’s Lady’s Book between 1846 and 1851 showed the mystique of the Neo-Gothic.

The influence of the Gothic Revival as a distinct nineteenth-century style lingered, predominantly in the form of churches, academic buildings, and townhouses. New York’s Gothic landmarks ranged from Trinity Church, built between 1840 and 1846, to the Woolworth Building, the cathedral of business erected between 1911 and 1913, and included the lofty spire of Grace Church, the massive structure of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, and the masonry towers of the Brooklyn Bridge. Although the Neo-Gothic stimulated theological thought and religious devotion, it lacked the vitality to order the modern city. Its architecture failed to produce visual harmony because the original style had been forged by the pattern of life, labor, and worship of the medieval city, which no longer existed.

The culture of the modern city was based on the residents’ distinct commercialism. Such a city could surely claim “a superior standing” and call for appropriate architectural expressions, as the report of the building committee of the New York Board of Aldermen reasoned in 1803, in justifying the extensive use of marble for three of the new city hall fronts. At mid-century, aware that a building represented “the exterior of society,” in a phrase popularized by Yale president Timothy Dwight, many city people came to think that the Palazzo style best served their aspirations.
tracted attention because it was at once practical and impressive. It mattered little to businessmen whether the inspiration came from Italian, French, English, or German sources, as long as the building looked stately. But in addition, and in contrast to the temple of the Greek Revival, the palazzo provided well-lighted space at low cost, particularly in combination with iron construction, in a design unit that could be repeated if necessary.  

Appearance and economy explained the popularity of the palazzo as the commercial style. Although it lived on until the builders of the largest business projects of the 1880’s turned to the skyscraper, the palazzo mode never dominated other styles to the extent that it could overcome the visual diversity of the urban landscape. It was unsuited to a world seething with seemingly unlimited liberties and boundless opportunities, which defied the old ideas of public order that in an earlier phase of American urban life had expressed republican virtues through Classical architecture.

Only through its mode of dividing space did the modern city achieve structural unity. The gridiron system reduced vast tracts of land to manageable segments of real estate. These lots could be joined into units that answered the needs of a warehouse, a factory, a train depot, or an apartment house complex. They satisfied the divergent interests of builders and speculators, residents and politicians, who could pursue their goals free of a ruler’s demand for a specific kind of urban order or a social ideal expressed in a dominant style of architecture. By this process the city was organized into distinct areas of work, residence, and leisure.

Space for leisure, in a predominantly work-oriented urban society, appeared in the form of the municipal park. The park arose from the interaction of a variety of influences, as varied as the urban scene itself, as a result of which the building of a park came to be seen as a suitable way to satisfy specific interests and at the same time serve the city as a whole. The broad support for the park briefly linked for that mutual purpose groups which opposed each other on issues of city life, until wrangling about the uses of the park, once achieved, reactivated their conflicts.

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Temporarily, money and art, politics and aesthetics worked together. Businessmen considering the rise of real estate values in a neighborhood or the flow of visitors riding streetcars joined company with visionaries who regarded a park as a work of art that produced primarily aesthetic and psychic benefits. Petty politicians, attuned to speculation in land and franchises, regarded a park project as a source of labor for faithful voters temporarily out of work in depression years. Since outsiders, that is those who did not share in the graft, viewed some official expenditures as signs of municipal corruption, local politicians welcomed the broad support for spending public money on parks. They were undoubtedly delighted by such comments as the San Francisco Real Estate Circular’s observation in 1873 that “no public money has been more economically or usefully expended” than on Golden Gate Park.  

Lastly, urban reformers presented areas of grass, trees, and lakes as the lungs of the city that would breathe fresh air into a congested, disease-ridden social organism. Their concern with hygiene matched the yearnings of other urbanites for relief from the gridiron’s “deadly uniformity of mean ugliness” that Edith Wharton recalled from her New York childhood.

Besides these obvious hopes attached to the municipal park, a kind of public conscience concerned about the quality of urban life in general directed a broad range of supporters to it. Cosmopolites among them had been inspired by the English example and had followed the European agitation for public gardens after the Napoleonic wars. They noticed the conversation between traveler and editor in landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing’s Horticulturist about the French and Germans who despite their politics seemed greater practical “republicans” than Americans because their cities had parks and gardens “provided at public cost, maintained at public expense, and enjoyed daily and hourly by all classes of persons.”

They also shared the sense of urgency voiced by the poet-editor William Cullen Bryant, who warned in 1844 that “commerce is devouring inch by inch” New York’s harbor, shore, and land, and
that “if we would rescue any part of it for health and recreation it must be done now.”¹⁵ In the parks of landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, who emerged as the towering figure of the municipal park movement in the United States, they saw instruments of reform providing relief from drudgery for thousands and fostering communal bonds between diverse groups of people.

Park proponents came into conflict not only with each other but also with groups of gymnasts and pedagogues, and proponents of zoological gardens, patriotic displays, and merry-go-rounds, who wanted to determine the uses of the park as soon as the transplanted trees showed their first fresh green. With the growing importance of the park in city life and its increasing use by large numbers of people, there appeared a “strong tendency” to convert it “into a great, perpetual metropolitan Fair Ground” that disturbed those who saw it as a work of art, “framed upon a single, noble motive,” as well as those who regarded it as a device to convert their fellowmen to their own concepts of leisure.¹⁶ In the long run, all supporters of the municipal park found their original ideas amended by the sheer number of people who responded to a public space in the modern city that suggested country scenery to their city imaginations.

The attempt to conjure up rural vistas in the modern city set the municipal park apart from other public spaces that had existed in American towns since the beginning of colonization. The design demanded more land than a common or a market, while the need for a park came to be felt at a stage of urban development that reduced drastically the amount of open space, concentrated large numbers of people in a limited area, and severed most residents’ ties with the countryside. These characteristics of the modern city may have accounted for the feeling that something new was afoot. Irrespective of analogous trends in European countries, Frederick Law Olmsted viewed the movement for municipal parks in the United States as an independent development, spontaneously engendered by the “Genius of Civilization.”¹⁷ Most residents, the

crowds of people untouched by rhetoric and unconcerned about origins or precedents, just cared for the grass and the trees that seemed to bring them in touch with nature for a few leisure hours.

Before the modern city began building parks, the remnants of nature on the urban scene had diminished steadily. Streets and buildings cut gradually into the green spaces of popular pleasure gardens, where on a pleasant day visitors could eat and drink or promenade past a few trees, some beds of flowers, and other guests of the establishment. They destroyed the country-like atmosphere that clung to these places, until only names attached to restaurants or theaters recalled former bucolic settings.

Rural cemeteries, which sprang up in the neighborhood of large cities in the 1830’s, not only assured mourners’ communion with nature but also attracted large numbers of visitors who liked greenery and open space. The dedication poem for the opening of Mount Auburn Cemetery in 1831 alluded to the gardens of Eden and Getsemane—“To the first garden’s doom we bend, / And bless the promise of the last”—introducing a fresh tone into burial literature that paralleled the rediscovery of nature in the urban environment through the municipal park.¹⁸

The enormous appeal of that first great “Garden of Graves,” which had been founded by the Massachusetts Horticultural Society in the vicinity of Boston to accommodate the crop that large cities raised bountifully, produced other spacious cemeteries.¹⁹ In 1849, Andrew Jackson Downing described the ten-year-old Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn as “grand, dignified, and park-like,” estimating that many of the 60,000 people who visited it during the summer came solely to enjoy trees and lawns.²⁰

The initiative of a few citizens determined to embellish the drab cityscape with horticulture and rural scenes or to succeed in business as nurserymen created botanical and public gardens, where the scientific atmosphere of conservatories and greenhouses gave a special legitimacy to moments of leisure devoted to the enjoyment of nature. Essential urban services, such as waterworks, also pro-
vided a focus for public parks, as the grounds of Fairmount Park in Philadelphia, with pumping stations along the Schuylkill River, demonstrated.

Without any pretense of paying respect to the dead, of devotion to science, or of serving a practical purpose, the design of New York's Central Park, the first great municipal park of the nineteenth century, boldly carried the search for harmony with nature into the core of a mid-century world that gave the undertaking its poignancy. One "great purpose of the park," as asserted by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux in their prize-winning plan of 1858, was "to supply to the hundreds of thousands of tired workers, who have no opportunity to spend their summers in the country, a specimen of God's handiwork." Nature and culture seemed to join in the modern city, too.

"Apart from considerations of sanitary economy," a public-spirited physician and one of the first reviewers of the history of parks and public grounds in the United States argued in 1869, "public parks may be regarded as an unerring index in the advance of a people in civilization and refinement." However, the landscape architects also considered the presence of the masses of people who made up the modern city a major obstacle in the pursuit of the fusion of city and nature. Their breathtaking vistas re-introduced nature into the urban landscape by keeping the surrounding city and its residents out of sight, behind shields of foliage.

Among all the manipulations of the environment in the modern city, the municipal park alone preserved public spaces for leisure, free from commercialism or pietism, in an order predominantly oriented toward work. In their attempts to assure its uses in socially acceptable ways, the designers relied on people's timeless respect for earth, trees, and water to bring forth their better nature in their communion with nature. In an age that encouraged the plunder of natural resources, they reinforced appropriate public behavior with guards who kept people on walks, lest they injure young trees and plants. However, there could not have been con-

concern that they would spoil the grass of Central Park, an English visitor speculated in the 1860's, "for during a considerable part of the summer the whole surface of the ground is thoroughly parched."

The "freedom of action and healthful recreation" which that observer missed was also missed by thousands of men and women who yearned for the kind of relaxation that suited them as individuals. The crowds' pressure reduced all visions about the uses of parks to a perpetual struggle to protect shrubbery, trees, and flowers and curb public expressions of leisure that violated the age's sense of decency. The freedom of the modern city limited the role of the municipal park as an instrument of social planning, but the attempt it represented to structure a part of the environment for the common good inspired a new concern for a measure of urban planning.

Although hopes for Olmsted's planned rural environment in the big city that had been attached to Central Park in the 1850's perished in the New York of the 1870's, the park movement in other cities benefited from the inspiration. Its supporters significantly broadened their concept of forms of relaxation to include diverse groups of people in "neighborly receptive recreations" that departed from the lofty vision of the rural park and substituted for it the practical urban playground. They recognized that activities on playgrounds in various neighborhoods adhered to local codes of behavior and that there was room for diverse forms of leisure in a city of heterogeneous people. Their awareness of the significance of leisure in an urban society grew into systematic efforts to build various recreation facilities "to meet the numerous interests of the neighboring community rather than to fulfill in the highest measure any single want of the whole city."

In the 1880's, Boston developed the "first local recreation ground," with a running track, field houses, sports equipment, and trained attendants. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the neighborhood park, a city block or two between factories and tenements, relied more on facilities for exercise and play and less
on pastoral scenes to provide opportunities for leisure. Grass gave way to sand, on fields and in boxes, and to water-filled pools, instead of lakes, to make people clean and healthy by enticing them to wade and swim.27

The multiple uses of playgrounds paralleled the expansion of planners’ thinking from individual parks to networks of interconnected parks, and from single boulevards to belts of parkways that girdled the whole metropolis. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Boston and Chicago furnished striking examples of this changed approach, which “instead of superimposing one oasis of beauty” on a big city aimed at changing the aspect of its entire life.28 In converting parks into “a series of country clubs for the poorer people,” the Architectural Record stressed in 1908, “no city in America has . . . spent money more freely and more consistently” than Chicago.29

The concern for public space awakened by the municipal park hardly improved the condition of the streets, which until the appearance of the automobile remained a “study in filth and frustration.”30 However, the park movement’s concern for the quality of urban life in general did draw attention to the significance of private space. This new awareness put the steadily growing suburbs in a new light.

In the spring of 1858, roaming through the “remote regions of Southern Brooklyn,” George Templeton Strong suddenly realized that a great city had been built there within his memory. “The compact miles of monotonous, ephemeral houses” which he overlooked from the Greenwood Cemetery ridge impressed him as a “great reef half bare at low tide and dense with barnacles,” each “throwing out its prebendal ciliu into the great sea.” His zoological analogy gave emphasis to his concluding comment: “Each is a home, . . . with better fortune or worse, good investments or bad, credit or disrepute, progress up or down, . . . an epitome of human life within each shabby domicile.”31

For those who could afford it, the search for a home in the modern city ended in the domesticity of the suburb. Frederick Law

Olmsted concluded in his report on Chicago’s Riverside area in 1868.32 The move to the suburbs was motivated by a longing for the pleasant aspects of nature, as well as rising land values in the built-up areas and improved transportation between outskirts and downtown. These considerations encouraged some people to escape the excessive rents destroying single-family homes in the city and to acquire a small house in the suburbs. Such a move, in the view of a Boston reformer, also promoted “the independence of character and life.”33 In 1874, the promotional tract of a Cincinnati railroad enunciated a more marketable combination when it promised businessmen who bought a suburban home “health and longevity” as well as “economy in living.”34

The soaring cost of real estate steadily reduced the amount of private space each person could call his or her own in the big city, while the new transit systems continued to tie land that was as yet distinctly rural to the urban world. These factors also led land speculators and real estate developers to survey fields, meadows, and woods and blueprint streets and boulevards onto them in advance of actual settlement. They created landscape, neither rural nor urban, where some people seemed to enjoy both city and country lives without experiencing the rigors of the latter. The natural hazards had long vanished, and most suburbanites saw nothing of them after they had learned, like the Suburban Sage, “to avoid the only patch of underbrush within a mile.”35

Suburban sprawl accompanying the earlier stages of urbanization became a characteristic of the modern city. It was intensified by industrial growth, population pressure, new modes of transport, and a nostalgia for rural life. Some of the earliest suburbs appeared in the 1820’s, but they were soon absorbed by municipalities that measured progress in terms of increased acreage and population. Annexations and consolidations not only increased the number of residents quickly, but also turned the modern city into a political entity of awesome dimensions.

The three largest American cities of the nineteenth century led the way. In 1854, Philadelphia expanded from 2 to 129 square
miles by absorbing independent suburbs. Chicago acquired its largest addition of 133 square miles in 1889. The most dramatic adjustment of boundaries took place in 1898 when New York City added Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, and part of the Bronx to Manhattan. Throughout the nineteenth century every large city shared these expansion booms, which cut short the development of independent foci of urban life on the periphery, reinforced the economic links which tied suburbanities to the modern city, and presaged the rise of new suburbs.

Most people, however, lived where their economic circumstances located them, in the residential districts of the modern city, “as it nearly always costs more time, effort and money to live well in the suburbs than in town,” a social worker emphasized in 1909. “Moderately well off” in the estimate of the rich, but definitely rich in the eyes of the poor, many members of the middle class took over houses at the edge of the central business sector, vacated by owners who had moved their families to the periphery of town or into the suburbs to get away from encroaching warehouses, office buildings, and small factories. They subdivided the old residences and rented single rooms or entire floors to lodgers, or ran boarding houses outright. By 1856, the custom was so widespread in New York that Walt Whitman accepted the estimate of “judicious and extensively informed observers” who assumed that seven out of ten dwellings were used that way. Counting permanent hotel boarders into this group, Whitman thought that almost three-quarters of the middle- and upper-class inhabitants of New York did what the little girl so aptly described when asked where her parents lived: “They don’t live, they BOARD.”

“Like death, no class is exempt from . . . this universal barrack system,” the author of an early comprehensive treatment of boarding-house life stressed in 1857. His lurid accounts of the many varieties of the institution drove home again and again his point that the boarding house did not and could not substitute for a home. However, he also considered it useless to rail against the “inherently mischievous” features of “our anomalous social state” as long as it was next to impossible to find a suitable dwelling in the big city for those who wanted to live at once “privately, decently, and economically.” In the 1870s, the Reverend Henry Morgan, as part of his crusade to purify Boston, sketched the horrid conditions of streets with “miles on miles of lodging-houses instead of homes.”

Among the big American cities of the nineteenth century, only Philadelphia managed to retain the image of a “City of Homes.” In 1880 one Philadelphian counted “a dwelling-house for every six inhabitants.” The city, at times castigated for the “doleful architecture” of these houses, took pride in loan associations that, in the form of savings banks, financed their construction. In 1900, with about five people to a home, it faced housing issues different from those of New York or Chicago. However, Philadelphia exhibited problems of population concentration in the form of the rear dwelling, a small house built singly or in rows in back of the front house and characterized by social workers “as the horizontal rather than the vertical tenement.”

Poor people, who in the eyes of many residents neither “lived” nor “boarded,” formed the most visible tenantry of the modern city. In a setting that priced traditional homes out of the reach of almost everyone, they were also at the mercy of “many mercenary landlords,” as the classic report about their housing put it in 1903. “who only contrive in what manner they can stow the greatest number of human beings into the smallest space.” The previous year, discussing Chicago housing, Jane Addams had emphasized that if the average tenement-house density in three districts investigated were spread throughout the city, “we could house within our borders 23,000,000 people.”

The landlords speculated on poor people’s need for shelter and their helplessness in the face of exploitation. Frequently immigrants themselves, aware of the thoughts, fears, and customs of their immigrant tenants, they obtained long-term leases on houses from owners who preferred to receive income without the burden of property management. For quick profits the landlords pursued a
policy that immediately made the houses overcrowded, filthy, and dilapidated. They divided the tenements, as these structures generally came to be called at mid-century, into as many small units as their greed could contrive and paid no attention to the conditions of the buildings or the tenants as long as they received the rent on time.46

Many concerns for the quality of private space vanished amid poor people’s clamor for housing. The tenants who rented on a weekly or monthly basis small rooms, which one observer of conditions in New York described in 1844 as closets, often sublet space in their rooms to raise the rent, which was due in advance.47 Waves of reform and waves of immigration clashed, so that the improvements in tenement living produced by one group were almost immediately obliterated when another flood of newcomers inundated the city seeking shelter and thus reactivating the pernicious cycle.

The ups and downs of one model tenement, New York’s Big Flat, built six stories tall on six city lots as the Workmen’s Home by philanthropists in 1855, epitomized the experimentation that attempted to improve housing in the second half of the nineteenth-century. Workingmen and their families, with and without boarders, almost immediately crowded all available space, from the cellars to the attics, from the hallways to the closets. In the hope that supervision would improve the conditions, the philanthropists converted the building into a well-organized home for workingwomen in the 1860’s, with room for about 500 boarders in sixty dormitories and twenty apartments. That experiment failed when women avoided the home because they disliked both the disreputable neighborhood and the filth and stench of decrepit tenements and small factories nearby. When private owners took over in the 1870’s, they restored the apartments and increased the number of them, and the Big Flat lost all claim to be a model tenement, with lodgers moving in again with the families and trespassers living again in the hallways. Each solution alleviated only temporarily the problems of sanitation, overcrowding, or trespass-

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sing in the face of the enormous demand for a decent place to live. Ultimately, failure crowned decades of struggle when the building was demolished in 1880-89 to make way for a carriage factory.48

The housing misery of the modern city directed many in search of private space to the apartment, which emerged at mid-century. This improvement in living conditions answered some of the needs of people who had previously tried to make a home in a boarding house. It also furnished an alternative to the social stigma of tenement-house living and an opportunity to better one’s status.

Most people who experienced the change would have smiled in disbelief at the reaction of a fastidious person when first encountering apartment living. Newland Archer was startled by the “unexpected vista of a bedroom” that he saw from the sitting room of the family matriarch in Edith Wharton’s Age of Innocence. The life of the aging Mrs. Manson Mingott was beyond reproach in the New York of the 1870’s, and she could risk moving her bedroom to the first floor to avoid climbing stairs. However, the foreignness of the setup brought to Archer’s mind scenes in French fiction and “architectural incentives to immorality such as the simple American had never dreamed of. That was how women with lovers lived in the wicked old societies, in apartments with all the rooms on one floor, and all the indecent propinquitities that their novels described.”49

The apartment house, universal in Paris and common in most other big European cities, was exotic in the American modern city of the late 1860’s. Many residents still imagined acquiring for their families a brownstone in a sidestreet, where uniform fronts disguised narrow homes that stood “like books on a shelf,” Charlotte Perkins Gilman thought.50 Although in 1894 Charles Augustus Sala regarded a house in London, which had doubled its population to five million inhabitants during his half-century of chronicling urban life, as “a far more advantageous dwelling, as well as infinitely more comfortable than a flat,” city growth—particularly skyrocketing real estate prices and cumbersome commutes—prevented fulfillment of the Anglo-American ideal of the
single-family residence and eliminated reservations about the "French Flats" as apartments were popularly known. \(^{51}\)

The development of the apartment house started in the 1830's when intensified urbanization began driving large numbers of residents into boarding houses and tenements. In 1833, poor New York families crowded into a tenement on Water Street, the first house built exclusively for tenant families of which I. N. Phelps Stokes—architect, housing reformer, and historian *par excellence* of Manhattan's iconography—had a record; in 1855 well-to-do families experimented with sharing the so-called Spanish Row on Fifth Avenue. \(^{52}\) Paris provided the models for the Stuyvesant Apartments built in 1869, the first structure erected in New York City as an apartment house for several families. The Parisian precedent legitimized making the modern city a world of apartments. Added respectability came from the social status of Rutherford Stuyvesant, who financed the venture, and the Paris training of Richard Morris Hunt, the first American student of the École des Beaux-Arts, who designed it. \(^{53}\) These credentials helped turn a subversive way of living into the dominant form of urban housing.

Land usage, building methods, and social conventions altered the Parisian heritage of the apartment in such a way that it only briefly remained a "French Flat." In France, the size of the lots and the habit of building for generations had encouraged the erection of big, solid houses and the family practice of living in flats. In America, the small family house, an ideal often pursued so recklessly that the structure barely outlasted the life of its builder, accounted for narrow lots and flimsy, cheap construction. The heritage of these practices, together with the outmoded idea of private space in the form of a single-family residence, the acquisitive instinct of builders, the social insecurity of middle-class tenants, and the actual dimensions of building lots created problems for the apartment house emerging in the modern city.

In the view of members of a leading New York firm of architects and builders of apartment houses in the 1890's, "even Yankee ingenuity could not devise several complete apartments all on one level and properly lighted and ventilated on a space intended for a single house." In addition, the light lath-and-plaster construction of these houses could not stand up to the wear and tear of several families, nor provide protection from noise, odor, or vermin, or safety in case of fire. \(^{54}\)

The social freedom of the modern city bred insecurity that in turn influenced the nature of the emerging apartment complexes. The absence of recognized dividing lines between people produced houses that, unlike Parisian buildings, did not shelter residents from different walks of life. In a French apartment house the relationships between the residents reflected long exposure to clearly defined social divisions. Artisans occupied the upper stories of houses; the lower floors were reserved for aristocrats. If such neighbors chanced to meet on the stairs, neither had to think about how to act because their behavior had been molded by earlier generations.

The free atmosphere of the American modern city brought distinct classes of apartment houses into existence, because the social flux that attracted people of different origin also prevented easy contact between various groups. Mobile people thriving on the opportunities of the modern city as well as suffering the social insecurities that made up-and-down movement possible, sought to buttress their newly gained position through the kind of housing they rented. Residents of the same status locked together under the same roof to reinforce their mutual resentment of all claims others made to social superiority and strove "through an excessive exclusiveness, to guard their dearly cherished state of exaltation." \(^{55}\) Residential districts reflecting that exclusiveness appeared as the most convenient way to assure a resident's enjoyment of his private space.

Ordinary builders of apartment houses had other immediate, tangible profits in mind. They speculated that the rich felt the housing pinch, too, and they built their new ventures first in fashionable quarters. These structures were leased long before they were completed. Their high rent placed them out of the reach of
people with moderate income, but their owners were looking for an immediate high return on their investment because they assumed there would be so many apartments in a short time that rents would drop below a rate they considered profitable.

Another negative influence was the method of financing and constructing, which interfered with erecting an apartment house that looked like a building designed to shelter families in search for homes in the modern city and not like a Moorish castle, a Romanesque city hall, or a baroque palace. If apartment buildings were designed for middle-class families, the speculative builders, living off borrowed money and facing the high costs of loans, land, and construction in their risky but determined pursuit of money, built cheaply to make quick profits and got away with it because people needed housing. The builders then frequently clung to an "architecture" of terra-cotta ornament just elaborate enough to spoil the impression of simple domesticity that housing reformers hoped to achieve, and the flimsy materials they used to produce ornate facades scarred the cityscape.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a commentator on Chicago apartment houses felt that in Midwestern cities lower land prices and lower structures resulted in more attractive buildings than "the thousands of six and seven-story apartment houses erected in Manhattan during the past fifteen years" that "have only tended to make it look either ugly, commonplace or trivial." 56 However, most people did not care about the aesthetics of the apartment house. For them the apartment offered a new concept of home; it was not merely "a substitute for the house," as it was called in 1903 by a leading architect who still saw the flat in relation to the single-family house. 57

The emerging apartment house reduced one of the great dilemmas of big-city living, the search for a suitable place for a family to live. Many families had moved every six months or year desperately seeking decent living quarters. In 1882, a journalist's vignette portrayed one resident's tension from ceaseless thinking about where and how he and his family would live. Stopping at any dwelling marked "To Let" to find out when, for how long, and for how much it could be had, had become second nature to him, even in his busiest moments. The sketch described him as "seldom settled anywhere," simply "staying in such a street, at such a number," until he moved again. That was "his custom and curse." For months and years "he had been waiting for a better, or less bad, order of things," but periodical promises of it had never yet been redeemed. Finally, trying to become resigned to the inevitable, the story envisioned him buying a lot in a cemetery, comforting himself with the reflection that, once a tenant there, he need not move—that he has at last secured a home. 58

The apartment house slowly alleviated such problems. However, "no one would be so foolish to imagine," commented Scribner's, expressing the pessimism of the seasoned urbanite in 1873, "that the general introduction of apartment houses would straightway inaugurate a domestic and social millennium." 59 The way in which apartment houses spread across the city reflected constant experimentation with new ways of living. Each setting was modified by the lay of the land, the need for flats, the availability of capital, the resourcefulness of speculators, and the aspirations of the tenants. On occasion, an area of the city went from open land to rows of apartments in one leap. Elsewhere a gradual transition involved closely spaced, free-standing residences and row houses as intermediate stages. The height of the buildings and the size of the apartments also varied widely. In New York City the size ranged upward from one room with one bath, and ultimately reached a fifty-four-room triplex with sixteen baths, built in 1926 at 1107 Fifth Avenue because the owner of a townhouse agreed to sell her site only if the builder would duplicate her residence on top of the new apartment structure.

Other extremes indicated the range of experimentation and of human nature. From 1882 until 1915, New York's narrowest apartment house stood on the northwest corner of Eighty-second Street and Lexington Avenue. It was 102 feet long and 5 feet wide, put up by the owner of the lot presumably to spite the builder of the
adjacent apartment house who had been willing to pay only one-fifth of the $5,000 he wanted. The rooms, strung out like railroad cars, required special furniture, and in the spiral staircase and narrow halls two people could not pass. However, until his death in 1897, the owner found space in his apartment for his coffin, built from the lumber of a tree he had chosen in 1854.60

Apartments became more readily available when they were built in less attractive neighborhoods, which they then upgraded. A number of families housed independently under one roof made a locality more respectable and tolerable than one family alone could, reducing the effect of objectionable features. In 1882, Harper's Magazine reported scores of apartment houses going up in New York near saloons, stables, tenements, and rookeries, "occupied by refined, fastidious people" who would never have thought of living in such a neighborhood as a single family.61 The clusters of apartment houses scattered through the city formed the cores of residential districts.

Some of the changes in housing entered into the opening chapters of A Hazard of New Fortunes, which William Dean Howells wrote in New York in 1889, "in a fine, old-fashioned apartment house, which once had been a family house." The Marches suffered disappointments in their search for a home in New York that were deepened by fresh memories of their Boston house. They listened to agents, explored neighborhoods in coupes, and were lured by advertisements "to numbers of huge apartment-houses chiefly distinguishable from tenement-houses by the absence of fire-escapes from their facades." They discovered that smell provided a distinction between gentility and shabbiness when a picturesque street invariably made its strongest appeal to their noses, and they developed dormant character traits in conversations with building superintendents while looking at expensive apartments and lying glibly when rejecting them "for one reason or another which had nothing to do with the rent."

Inflexibly, or so it seemed to the Marches, the New York ideal of a flat was seven rooms and a bath—or sometimes eight, counting the bath as one room and any room with a window to the open air, a court, or a shaft as a room with daylight. They considered houses, too, but all within their means were small; further, "the fact that none of them was to rent kept Mrs. March true to her ideal of a flat" and induced Mr. March to try living his "Anglo-Saxon home," as he knew it from the "Anglo-Saxon house," in the "Franco-American flat."62

The emergence of the apartment house in the modern city of the 1860's marked the waning of housing concepts that dated back to the rebuilding of rural England during the reigns of Elizabeth and the first Stuarts. In the middle of the sixteenth century, many English people still lived in the cramped quarters of the late Middle Ages, often eating, working, and sleeping in a one-room cottage. Gradual changes brought additional rooms and stories and a general division between living and sleeping space, so that by the 1650's "the typical farmer's house had three to six rooms, rising to eight and ten among the bigger yeomen."63

English colonists in North America carried this rural mode of housing, oriented around the privacy of a spacious dwelling, into their growing towns. While urban laborers never managed to live that way, affluent people clung to the ideal as long as they could and burdened their cities with a troublesome heritage. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, New Yorkers divided their city blocks into small lots of 25 by 100 feet, sufficient at that time for a moderate house with rooms lighted from the street and yard. They thus created a unit of land ownership that by the end of the nineteenth century had become "the worst curse which ever afflicted any great community" because a narrow, high-rising building now crowded every inch of the small space.64

In the modern city the apartment constituted a basic unit of urban life that once again could expose the whole family to what Howells called "the moral effect of housekeeping."65 Parents and children sat down for dinner at "their" table, instead of eating à la carte in a restaurant or table d'hôte in a boarding house, like one of Henry James's Bostonians, who "got her supper at a boarding-table
about two blocks off." The group around the table in the kitchen or dining room of the apartment was a single family unit, a fact reflected in the smallness of the room. It gave a feeling of home, in contrast to the boarding house, where one of Frank R. Stockton's heroines "never felt at home except when she was out."

Occupants quickly embraced the improved conveniences of the apartment, which with running cold and hot water, steam heat, elevators, separate toilets, electric light, fire exits, and more privacy made their lives safer and healthier. Technological advances and apartment living complemented one another. The innovations made accepting the new life-style easier, and the flats demonstrated the advantages of the innovations. Both lightened the daily drudgery of women in the home. In the face of the alternative of suburban housing, they produced yet another argument in favor of apartment living: it freed the energy and time particularly of middle-class women, who were surrounded by opportunities to utilize their freedom. Although in 1870 Manhattan had consisted of single-family homes, boarding houses, and tenements, in 1900, when only ten single-family houses were built, apartment houses dominated the island.

The interaction of the new household technology with the new mode of living stimulated a brief series of experiments with various styles of apartment-house living. Fashionable "apartment hotels" had communal dining rooms instead of private kitchens, while in others family cooks worked in a downstairs kitchen and servants sent the meals into the apartments in dumb-waiters. The need for privacy went unanswered in most of these cases, and the experiments continued until the self-sufficient family flat in a well-managed apartment house became the desirable form.

As an essential urban institution the apartment house had a number of economic advantages. It was an intensive and functional way of living that permitted the concentration of people in most areas of the big city, boosted land values almost everywhere, stimulated building construction, and augmented the power of capital to provide services. It created new jobs and enabled people to benefit more directly from the jobs their great numbers called into being. Tenants' needs for services ranging from garbage collection to elevators created groups of employees attached to an apartment house, from manager to janitor.

The daily retreat of residents—adults returning from work and children from school—into the many stories of the apartment house adjusted people to the vertical growth of the big city, a dimension of urban life that guests and clerks in high-rising hotels and offices had already begun exploring. The movement into vertical space also brought freedom from the vexation of keeping up a house and grounds. The labor-saving devices linked to apartment living shortened domestic work, while other innovations—such as electric light, which came into many homes via the apartment—quite literally lengthened everyone's day. With several families living under one roof, the burden of cooperation enforced by necessity was slight compared with the amount of convenience and comfort the apartment offered relative to boarding-house or tenement life, or to searching for a brownstone rental.

The spread of apartment houses enhanced the job mobility city life offered by enabling people to find basically equal living conditions wherever new jobs appeared. Such a new flat, in another part of the city, in many cases was removed from the ground by several flights of stairs. The vertical expansion of attractive living units increased the area of urban space that could be structured by the individual.

The isolationist features of modern city life, fostered by the division of urban space, were partially offset by the emerging systems of urban transit. Assuring the viability of separate business, factory, and residential districts, innovations in urban transport linked the sectors of the modern city. The horse-drawn omnibus appeared in Paris in 1819, in New York in 1827, and in London in 1829. Although New York had experimented with the first horse-drawn streetcars in 1832, the national streetcar vogue did not occur until the late 1850's. The pioneer lines of Boston began operation in 1856, and those in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Chicago,
Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis in 1859 and 1860. In the latter year, horse-drawn streetcars also began to run in San Francisco, and soon San Franciscans learned to rank the “modern horse car” as one of the “most indispensable conditions of modern metropolitan growth.”

The horsecars, however, did not provide vast numbers of laborers with a chance to leave their congested living quarters. To be sure, they were faster, cheaper, and more convenient than the older horse-drawn omnibuses, which lacked the tracks that set aside a segment of urban space for the horsecars. Still, the horsecars were too slow and their fares too high to start men who worked ten hours a day for one or two dollars thinking about living elsewhere than in their crowded tenements. “At whatever cost of comfort and health, and even of money,” the prize essay of the American Economic Association for 1892 argued, “the workman will live near his work, and unless the factories are moved to the suburbs, he will continue to reside in the most crowded portion of our cities.”

Subsequent innovations in urban transit further improved communication among the city’s districts. Street railways, cable cars, elevated railroads, and electric trolleys replaced the horsecars. These new forms allowed more affluent residents to live further from the business district, making a daily commute part of their urban existence and taking a step further the deconcentration, signaled by the movement of these people into suburbia, that had already characterized the “largest American cities before the introduction of the electric streetcar in the 1890’s.”

Technologically, the electric trolley eliminated most of the drawbacks of the horsecar and the cable car. It was more sanitary than the former, and safer and faster than both. Horses fouled the streets, and their droppings released the tetanus bacterium that endangered public health. The animals also represented a major investment that could be wiped out by an epidemic such as the Great Epizootic of 1872, which killed 2,250 horses in Philadelphia within three weeks. Cable cars produced hazards, too, above all on the curves, which had to be taken at top speed, frequently fouling grips in loose cable strands and sending the car out of control. These threats disappeared when the electric car appeared on the urban scene.

The electric trolley “was one of the most rapidly accepted innovations in the history of technology.” Between 1894 and 1897 it eliminated cable cars from most cities. In 1890, about 70 percent of street railways relied on horses or mules; by 1902, 97 percent used electricity. But the regularly scheduled runs of the trolley frequently stalled in the congestion of downtown traffic. Long strings of cars often lined up on the tracks of the crowded downtown streets that fed into the core of a ten-, twenty-, or thirty-story city. At times the only breaks in the chain of stalled streetcars occurred at cross streets, where stages, drays, and the antiquated horsecar of a cross-town connection struggled to get through the barrier heightened the confusion.

In general, the new systems of transportation served the immediate need of the modern city by facilitating communication between its various districts, even though most companies extended lines only as far as their competition forced them or their profits encouraged them to do. It was primarily the routes running out of the central business district that produced enough demand to justify investment in an electric line.

The potential of efficient transportation for placing better residential areas into the reach of working people received slight attention from companies ensnared in battles over franchises. However, the presence of the suburbs functioned as a kind of psychological safety valve. The Boston suburbs that grew with the help of the streetcar between 1870 and 1900 served to assure aspiring poor families “that should they earn enough money they too could possess the comforts and symbols of success.”

Exploiting transportation needs within the modern city appealed to speculators and investors more than building into uncharted suburbia because, broadly speaking, it required less capital and represented fewer risks. Although there were streetcar lines serv-
ing suburbs, these systems were not extensively developed, because the outlying areas lacked the concentration of people on which public transport thrived; as yet suburbia was unexplored as an alternate mode of living by the great number of residents. The crowds of passengers in the city itself did not strain the limits of the technology as much as did the unfocused demand for stops, stations, and services in suburbia before the automobile increased individual mobility.

As far as city people were concerned, convenient access to a streetcar line was more important than the speed of travel. The tracks, fanning out from the city center in several directions, aimed at touching as many clusters of apartments and tenements with as many stops as possible. The resulting delays reduced the rate of progress, but getting off and on a tram as close to home as possible was considered worth the longer trip. Without straining technology or reducing profits, the streetcar assured the functioning of the divided world of the modern city.

Rapid transit, the next development, involved the adaptation of the streetcar to the transportation needs of even greater numbers of people who were in a hurry. In 1897, Chicago saw the first multiple streetcar unit. Electric trains quickly replaced existing steam elevated lines. Beginning with the Boston subway in 1898, Boston, New York, and Philadelphia built underground rapid-transit systems until the Panic of 1907 stopped private construction of lines.

Rapid-transit technology surpassed the streetcar in speed and safety, but it was less flexible in its routes and demanded larger investments. Although it could carry more passengers, only the geographic, demographic, and commercial characteristics of New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago generated the level of traffic that could sustain these lines as additional links between well-defined business, residential, and factory districts. There, during the morning and evening rush hours, as these segments of the day came to be called in the late 1890’s, when a “modern steel building twenty to thirty stories high and housing thousands in place of hundreds under one roof” absorbed or discharged its workers, “the concentration of people in the trains and cars is like the packing of sardines in a box.”

In the modern city, forms of public transport unified the divided urban space. They linked residence, place of work, shopping areas, and centers of entertainment, and kept suburbs an integral part of the modern city. No matter how far away people lived, the streetcar tracks radiating from the city center tied them to the downtown business district. Despite the absence of systematic planning and the inability of traditional architectural forms to shape the cityscape, public transport gave it a functional unity. That unity lasted until the automobile freed residents from tracks, increased their lateral mobility, and broke their dependence on the trolley to travel between residence and districts of work, shopping, or amusement. The freedom of movement the automobile produced undermined the unity achieved by streetcars and eventually made suburbs independent entities.

While the streetcar assured physical contact between individual residents and their cityscape in a divided world, another new instrument of mass communication, the metropolitan press, fostered emotional bonds among residents.