I had something to do with the early days of city planning.

Mary K. Simkhovitch

Early in the twentieth century, New York reformers advocated the physical reconstruction of the city that would break through nineteenth-century traditions. As progressives, they accused their forebears of an unwarranted faith in limited government and private ownership. They said that the Gilded Age had refused to face the problem of poverty, except in stark Calvinist terms, which meant the almshouse or the penitentiary. They disparaged the older generation as mugwump liberals, sentimental dabblers in municipal reform who had no concept of what American cities might achieve when government, enlightened business, and active citizens worked together. They expected new, energizing ideas to propel a vast reconstruction.

The rebuilders focused on old New York, the tangle of 50-foot streets, sweatshops, and disease-ridden residences below Canal Street, and particularly Five Points, a netherworld of saloons, rookeries, and dumbbell tenements that was home to thousands. Grim reminders of nineteenth-century greed, rookeries were mansions and warehouses that before the Civil War had been subdivided into airless barracks to exploit immigrants’ desperation for shelter. Dumbbell tenements were so named because of their shape; the narrow “waist” of each tenement created a sliver airshaft that builders claimed ventilated the inside rooms of buildings that were put up one next to another. Largely unregulated by law, builders covered Manhattan’s
25-by-100 foot lots with some 20,000 dumbbells and spread wood-framed variations around Brooklyn’s Navy Yard and in Williamsburg. In 1900, the greater city, which included Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the outer boroughs, had some 83,000 of these cheap structures. Reformers, who argued for the scientific arrangement of modern municipalities, condemned the tenement districts that choked the city’s commercial arteries and smothered hundreds of thousands in airless rooms. Nevertheless, traditional ideas about private rights sabotaged dire public need.¹

By the early 1920s, reformers had thrust aside the intellectual limits on what the city could do. They had challenged urban poverty with a liberal ideology for state action and the constitutional authority to back government’s new mission. Their social analysis of lower-class communities established norms for residential decency, while their economic research showed the subsidies needed to make standard housing available to the poor. Their theories about the relationships among the central business district, the factory zone, and the residential neighborhood provided the basis for the science of city planning. But intellectual breakthroughs detached reform from accountability. Social analysis of lower-class neighborhoods allowed upper-class reformers to speak for the poor with consume authority. Municipal efforts were unleashed without any corresponding increase in lower-class power to influence policies. City planning tested the legitimacy of working-class neighborhoods and sanctioned their removal in the name of economic progress. The self-confident, activist state, which saw no reason to accommodate the “little people” in its plans, would prove fundamental to the New York approach.

Public Needs, Private Acts

Nineteenth-century traditions about private property had long shaped the way that New York redeveloped land. Even with the Jeffersonian reverence for limited government and private rights, local government had great authority to seize property in the interest of general welfare. Before the Civil War, many cities used the police power, the state’s inherent right to remove threats to public safety, but the ultimate instrument of public will was the power of eminent domain to force the sale of private property for public purpose. New York State used this authority and delegated it to municipalities and to corporations that served the public purpose.
With this primal force, New York City built the Croton Aqueduct, laid out and widened boulevards (including several that struck at the Five Points slum), allowed elevated railroads to take easements along major uptown routes, and conferred power to the East River (Brooklyn) Bridge’s projectors, who reshaped downtown. With audacious power, Boss William M. Tweed, like his Parisian contemporary, Baron Haussmann, planned a viaduct railroad through the heart of the city that would displace thousands.2

The privatism that progressives attacked in 1900 was the unfortunate legacy of the Tweed Ring and the depression of 1873. The viaduct railroad scheme fell victim to the scandals that overtook Tweed. In the hard times that followed, fiscal conservatives attacked public works as confiscation of property, imposed controllers’ vetoes on expensive projects, and subjected improvements to special assessments (which put costs on local property owners). State judges reread the law of eminent domain to enlarge claims made by property owners against “injurious” public works, particularly the cinder-spewing elevateds. As self-appointed guardians, judges disallowed the taking of property beyond what was absolutely necessary to accomplish public objectives. By the 1890s, they had thrown vague rationales of “public interest” in favor of the rigid formula of “public use” and asserted their prerogative to second-guess the legislature’s claims. State court of appeals decisions such as the landmark In re Jacobs struck down attempts to regulate economic activities and sharply curtailed state efforts to tax and spend.3

Restrictions became ironclad when the U.S. Supreme Court’s Monongahela decision (1893) imposed on local governments the Fifth Amendment’s ban on taking private property without “just compensation.” The Court proclaimed that the monetary assessment, including the property’s profit-making potential, was the province of judges, not lawmakers. Cities could not condemn property except for clear public use, which prohibited, for instance, construction of low-rent municipal housing, which the courts denounced as narrow “class legislation.” Cities that ventured ahead faced daunting costs, because Monongahela mandated condemnation awards based on what judges determined was fair market value, not what reformers argued was worthless slums. Plans for efficient, low-cost housing could be stymied by the exorbitant demands of holdout owners. For a generation, Monongahela symbolized the outrageous protection that American law gave to private property.4

In a fundamental way, however, advocates of municipal action counted on another of privatism’s legacies—that victims of public
works were the responsibility of private charity. That attitude was set down in the early nineteenth century, when municipal government adopted common law notions that gave property owners virtual supreme rights to acquire and dispose of real estate. Property transactions were the inviolable realm of landlords and tenants, and most rentals were based on month-to-month oral understandings rather than written leases. But whether by lease or handshake, landlords remained in control, thanks to “summary proceedings” codified by the state legislature, which allowed them to obtain from a city magistrate quick judgments of illegal occupancy and orders for eviction. The municipal corporation relied on the same private law to speed public improvements. Whether the city widened a street or condemned hundreds of acres to use for a park, municipal attorneys employed summary proceedings to evict occupants without obligation to rehouse them. Like any other landlord, the city left evictions to sheriff’s marshals, who carried occupants and their furnishings to the sidewalk. Occasionally the marshals contacted the churches or relief societies to provide aid. But people mostly relocated themselves.5

Although the potential for abuse was enormous, it was mitigated by everyday custom. Early attempts by the municipality to take property to use for public streets resulted in spirited litigation by owners determined to wrest compromises in the form of damage awards. Those who owned property or had access to municipal officers found ways to cushion confiscations. Artisans had less influence, but their protests, championed by politicians, could sometimes delay clearance. Careful adjustments, moreover, preceded dramatic removals. Opposition to property seizures and construction gangs for the Croton Aqueduct raged in Westchester, where country squires saw the city as an interloper. But no protests occurred in Manhattan, where Croton water was vital to Gotham’s progress and Tammany had spread the profits from laying street mains.6

Dislocations that accompanied the construction of Central Park in the 1850s reveal how authorities finessed pushing people aside. The park required the city’s largest removal up to that time—a squatter settlement with an estimated 5,000 inhabitants. The first stage leveled “Seneca Village,” the sarcastic name given to a population of whites and mulattoes. Observers said the villagers lived peacefully by their own quaint customs and were tended by an Episcopal vicar. When acreage was condemned for reservoir grounds in 1856, the missionaries eased a peaceful departure. Three years later, there was no sympathy for the bone boilers who occupied shacks near West 59th Street. Journalists cheered when this obnoxious den was scat-
tered by police deployed in military array. But this show of force was the exception. Progress was uninterrupted when public works were given unassailable claims as community necessities. The political system, particularly the clubs that operated on the ward level and depended on real estate deals, helped placate resentments. On occasion, religion was dolloped to the disgruntled. The result was startling. Riot-prone New Yorkers used rocks and barrel staves against blacks, abolitionists, Irish Catholics, doctors, and draft enrollers, but they never fought to protect their homes.7

Housing Improvement

From the beginning, urban redevelopment borrowed the moral authority of housing reform, the movement that criticized the way the marketplace provided shelter for the poor. It was dominated by middle-class activists who discovered poverty, determined how far they would go toward eradication, and shaped policies for acting in the best interests of the poor. When the pioneer New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (AICP) encountered the denizens of Five Points in the 1850s, members knew the poor were stricken by lack of will, which only a few could overcome with Scripture. While poverty increased during the late nineteenth century, reformers continued to embrace those they considered to be the “worthy poor,” whose work habits and morality justified a temporary handout. During the depression of 1873, this preference was institutionalized by the Charity Organization Society, which used investigations and case records to avoid giving to the shiftless. New York reform was thereafter shaped by the resulting tautology: aid went to carefully screened clients whose reliable character guaranteed that this ministry would neither fail nor perturb its ministers.

Organized to battle poverty without quite reaching the poor, housing reformers mounted a two-pronged attack against a system of private property that was unable to build decent homes at prices that poor people could afford, roughly $2 or $3 per room per month. First, reformers sought tenement restrictions, chiefly fire and sanitary codes based on the police power, that could force repairs or empty overcrowded, unsanitary rookeries. Their pressure on state lawmakers brought enactment of tenement laws in 1857, 1867, and 1879 and incremental gains. But because reformers emphasized the menace of slums as they struggled against constitutional protections of property rights, they contributed to the public’s ready
confusion of slum dwellers with slum property. In 1857, the state legislature considered authorizing housing inspectors to keep lists of tenements, gambling dens, and saloons. From the beginning, the restrictive course rested on assumptions that slums were created by the shiftless poor.8

The second, more positive, campaign was the attempt by Protestant philanthropy to increase the supply of low-rent housing by building “model” or improved tenements as an example for the private sector. In the 1870s, Edith F. Miles, an American disciple of English reformer Octavia Hill, used Hill’s technique of intrusive visits to collect rent and admonish behavior at the AICP model tenements on Mulberry Street and the Fourth Ward’s notorious Gotham Court. Miles had no patience for those who were unable to meet her standards and cleared the Court of “disreputable occupants,” replacing them with “a more decent, orderly and paying class of tenants.” She charged standard rents for spartan rooms, safe in the view that people would pay extra for the privilege of moral surroundings.9

Edith Miles was only a dabbler compared to Brooklyn merchant Alfred T. White, who put model tenements on a scientific, paying basis. In 1876, White built a block of model tenements in Brooklyn Heights for 600 residents. Charging $1.90 to $2.50 per week for four-room suites, his buildings netted 7 percent profit. White soon followed with the six-story Tower Apartments, which featured large suites that faced on balcony galleries and had indoor toilets. Although his designs attracted national attention as boons for the poor, the dwellings actually were occupied by clerks and well-paid artisans. In candid moments, White was reconciled to serving the upper working class, whose vacated homes he felt would filter down to the poor. The result was much the same for White’s Manhattan counterpart, the Improved Dwellings Association, which built an impressive block of tenements on East 71st Street that sheltered 208 families and returned 5 percent to investors. From the outset, the association drew tenants from the middle class: building tradesmen, clerks, and engineers, half of whom earned over $3 per day and could have afforded decent nearby flats.10

When American political economists Elgin R. L. Gould and Marcus T. Reynolds reviewed such ventures on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1890s, they heralded the advent of model housing on a mass scale. Reynolds went so far as to call “‘philanthropy and five per cent’ . . . an accomplished fact.” But most model housing struggled to pay 3 percent, and even this depended on techniques that business philanthropy chose not to acknowledge, such as sub-
stantial, if hidden, municipal subsidies and sifting of the worthy poor. England’s Peabody Trust used land purchased at discount from municipal authorities under the Artisans’ Dwelling Improvement Acts, and other trusts took advantage of cheap condemned property made available by the Housing of the Working Class Act of 1890. Cash flow came from the rents paid by solid artisans or, in the case of the Peabody Trust, by the “upper lower classes.” The few municipal projects, such as those in Liverpool and Glasgow, also ended up sheltering the lower middle class. Larger ventures often exploited lower-middle-class demand for units to offset losses on their working-class properties. Few philanthropic trusts, in any case, developed techniques to find tenants who really needed low-rent housing. Most recruited haphazardly, which only eased their reliance on preferred groups.¹¹

By the turn of the century reformers’ flight from the poor became routine policy, exemplified by the careers of Jacob Riis and Elgin R. L. Gould. Riis, the yellow journalist on the morals beat, made his reputation barging into Bowery flophouses after midnight, with flash pan held ready. His photographs of bewildered poor, published in newspapers and in his sentimental exposé, How the Other Half Lives (1890), unnerved the genteel classes and helped launch public investigations of the tenement evil. At the height of reform fervor, citizens groups, led by the Charity Organization Society (COS), drafted a restrictive attack on dumbbell tenements, which the legislature enacted as the Tenement House Law of 1901. The law required that new tenement construction meet minimum standards for room size and side courts and maximum (generally two-thirds) lot coverage. Although the 1901 legislation could not eliminate 83,000 Old Law rookeries and dumbbells, it did impose “New Law” standards in the outer boroughs, where speculative builders found room for the 35-to-50-foot-wide lots that the restrictions virtually required for a decent economic return.¹²

With that great victory for the restrictive cause, Riis and his associates redoubled their efforts in scientific philanthropy. Their instrument was Elgin Gould, academic economist turned housing administrator. Gould’s doctoral research into the economics of model tenements had already won national prominence when the COS, advised by Riis and others, incorporated the City and Suburban Homes Company and chose Gould as president. He remained until his death in 1915, molding a philanthropic giant that sheltered thousands in model tenements across New York. The company routinely paid 4 percent to upper-class stockholders, because Gould built on
the solid English experience of screening applicants, using women rent visitors, and expanding facilities to cover a range of rents.\textsuperscript{13}

Riis admired City and Suburban’s first project, the Alfred Corn-
ing Clark Buildings, fireproof structures designed by Ernest Flagg on West 68th Street. Tenants paid $11.40 for three rooms and $14.60 for four—at least one-third higher than comparable working-class rents. Riis reported that occupants came from the “better class of working people,” such as mailmen, railroad workers, and other “re-
spectable mechanics.” The Clark Buildings, moreover, were located near the West Side’s middle-class brownstones and borrowed on that district’s market power. A 5 percent return prompted Gould to
double City and Suburban’s capitalization and erect a second block across town on East 64th Street. Riis judged these buildings to be “the best that can be done in fighting the slum within the city.” But he had greater hopes for Homewood, City and Suburban’s bungalow village in South Brooklyn. On a large site, restricted against facto-
ries and saloons, the company built one hundred brick-and-stucco
cottages priced at $3,100 apiece. Cooperating with life insurance actuaries, City and Suburban offered twenty-year mortgages that re-
duced monthly charges to $25. The cost was reasonable, but the lower middle class paid less for four-room flats in Manhattan.\textsuperscript{14}

Reformers rarely paused over their failure to reach the poor, a reluctance to face reality that bordered on the callous. In the mid-
1890s, Riis and his associates goaded city officials to step up their police campaign against tenement violations. For a time, the Board of Health forced closure of 400 rookeries per year, a rate that sur-
passed construction of cheap dumbbells south of Canal Street. But that pace of elimination generated a class of refugees with little other recourse than nearby tenements or flophouses. (Riis was puzzled by the surge in flophouse bunks, which reached 18,000 along the Bow-
ery in the late 1890s. He blamed saloons for demoralizing patrons with cheap beer.) When the 1895 state legislature authorized the board to pull down tenements that endangered public health, Riis directed it against Gotham Court and others on his list of en-
emies. “From among them we picked our lot,” he gloated, “and the department drove the tenants out.”\textsuperscript{15}

Riis regarded clearance of Mulberry Bend as the great triumph of his “ten years’ war” against the slum. It took nearly that long to pass the Small Parks Act and get the city to spend the money. But in 1895, the Bend’s squalid tenements and lodging houses were leveled to make Columbus Park, one of the new “lungs of the poor.” Thousands fled to nearby tenements, then moved again as specula-
tors tore down additional rookeries to build middle-class flats facing
the park. Although Riis never questioned this displacement, he once
observed that park improvements unhoused 10,000 people. His war
necessitated front-line triage, which calculated immediate cruelties
against long-range gains. This calculation was behind his admiration
for City and Suburban’s Homewood bungalows. Looking over plans
for this refuge in South Brooklyn, Riis conceded that it would bene-
fit the lower middle class. “This is as it should be,” he insisted. “They
represent the graduating class, as it were, from the city crowds. . . .
Any attempt to hasten the process by taking a short cut could only
result in failure and disappointment.”

The Imperial City

By the turn of the century, this detachment from the displaced, com-
bined with the vogue in urban planning known as the City Beautiful
movement, unleashed massive surgery against the slums. Expansion
of downtown commercial and wholesale districts made businessmen
impatient with the fiscal and legal constraints that protected the
nineteenth-century street grid. Mercantile leaders argued that the
city had to complete its backlog of street widenings, paving projects,
and extensions. Manhattan desperately needed north-south arteries.
City engineers proposed running Sixth Avenue south to meet West
Broadway at Franklin Street. They also favored eliminating the flop-
house district by widening Park Row to the Bowery. Municipal
consolidation with Brooklyn put construction of a second, and even
a third, East River bridge on the agenda, along with new avenues to
connect the two business centers.

Although public works were rationalized as improving business
transport, they were encouraged by the grandeur of the City Beau-
tiful concept. The Beaux-Arts splendors of Paris and the classical
esplanades of Chicago’s “White City” of 1893 inspired New Yorkers
to conjure projects that ranged from the preposterous to the merely
implausible. For central Manhattan, architect Ernest Flagg proposed
a 900-foot-wide greensward between Sixth and Seventh avenues,
from 14th Street to the Harlem River. Julius F. Harder sketched
bold diagonal avenues through the Lower East Side, and Edward P.
North proposed running straight boulevards from the Manhattan
Bridge plaza at Delancey and Norfolk streets and diagonals from the
Bowery to 23rd Street. North termed them “Engineer’s Routes” that
would “be a matter of convenience to a large part of our population.”
The City Beautiful's "Engineer's Routes," 1899. Diagonals drawn through tenement districts were planners' ideas for modern boulevards to speed traffic and to redeem adjoining property. The map on the left accompanied Edward P. North's essay "The Planning of Cities." George B. Post's contribution to the same essay included monumental plazas for the Williamsburg Bridge and for a new city hall. Reprinted from *Public Improvements*, November 1 and 15, 1899.
He also claimed they would convert a teeming district “to business purposes, sending its inhabitants to more spacious and healthy quarters elsewhere.” Architect George B. Post, an associate of Jacob Riis in tenement reform, argued for a monumental circle at the Delancey Street plaza and radiating avenues to Union Square, Broadway, and Park Row. For a vast space cleared between Worth and Reade streets, he proposed a magnificent city hall that would reclaim “the tenement house district and would make property valuable where it is now cheap.”

Visionary plans were accompanied by aesthetic falderal and commercial boosterism, not calculated need. When the Municipal Art Society, spearhead of the City Beautiful, was enjoined by Mayor Seth Low to propose a city plan, the result was a wish list of projects, none based on what the society called “structural and transportation findings.” Nevertheless, the society’s claims about the need for freight terminals and commercial routes forced Mayor George B. McClellan, Jr., to appoint a City Improvement Commission. Its reports, issued in 1904 and 1907, provided another collection of gossamer sketches for monumental plazas and magnificent miles. The commission called for the creation of bold thoroughfares: Chrystie Street widened to connect Second Avenue with the Manhattan Bridge, Seventh Avenue extended south through Greenwich Village to Varick Street, Sixth Avenue driven south to the intersection of Chambers and West streets, and the approaches of the Manhattan Bridge lengthened to meet those from the Williamsburg.

Even City Beautiful advocates shunned the schemes, although their dismissals were couched in monetary rather than in human cost. Architectural critic Herbert Croly, no enemy of civic grandeur, agreed that New York needed diagonal thoroughfares and lauded the commission’s ideas. But he blanched at the expense, which he estimated at several hundred million dollars. He favored practical goals, such as the extension of Seventh Avenue through Greenwich Village. Croly saw that the stumbling blocks continued to be the constitutional limits on expropriation and spending and, he fumed, selfish property owners who stood against needed change. New York’s future, Croly argued, hinged on fundamental revisions in the state constitution.

Reformers agreed that a new era demanded new legal authority or, rather, maneuvering room around eminent domain. Citing European examples, they advocated what they called “excess condemnation,” the municipal sale of surplus land taken for improvements. They noted Vienna’s magnificent Ringstrasse, built from the pro-
ceeds of sales of extra land condemned by the municipality, and London’s $25 million Kingsway, cut through congested slums, with the sale of surplus land easing the burden on taxpayers. Reformers argued that enlarged property condemnations could recoup the cost of public improvements and renew neighborhoods when cities auctioned the abutting strips to private developers. They tried to convince legislators and judges that the idea had legitimate American roots. They claimed that excess condemnation had been working quiet miracles since the 1880s, when enhanced property assessments accompanied the completion of Central Park. The Municipal Art Society and the City Improvement Commission cited the phenomenal increase in land values near Columbus Park and William H. Seward Park. They pointed to lost opportunities, such as when the widening of Delancey Street touched off speculative interest in commercial lots, which city ownership might have exploited. George Post argued that if the city took property 200 feet beyond the avenues, the cost of his vast proposal would be “much more than met.” With excess condemnation, New York might subsidize a large portion of development expense. If done right, clearance might even become self-sustaining. But doing so meant turning renewed areas over to commercial and residential developers, whose speculative rents would buoy property assessments. A clever sidestep of constitutional limits, excess condemnation posed grave questions about the city’s social constitution.21

Even within Monongahela limits, New York reached a scale of public works that would have made Boss Tweed envious. On the teeming Lower East Side, projects authorized by the Small Parks Act created William H. Seward Park, Hamilton Fish Park, and Columbus Park, and removed approximately 190 tenements and 13,300 residents (rather than the 10,000 that Riis conceded). The neighborhood was endowed with enlarged public schools, including eight new buildings, some with playgrounds, but at the loss of at least 100 more tenements. Modern boulevards, Sixth and Seventh avenues, were driven south through Greenwich Village. Linking with Varick Street, Seventh Avenue bisected the Village and caused the eviction of 5,000 residents.22

Monumental bridges, built as gateways to the greater city, submerged another portion of the Lower East Side. In the spring of 1901, the Williamsburg Bridge’s approaches along Delancey Street necessitated removal of some 200 tenements, leaving the district, said an observer, “as though a cyclone had struck it.” Although an estimated 12,000 tenants were driven out, the Jewish “hegira” oc-
Public improvements cut swaths through the tenements of the Lower East Side, 1908. Looking west, April 30, 1908, along the approach for the Manhattan Bridge, clearance of Old Law tenements reveals the interior airshaft of a six-story dumbbell on the left. Photo 541, III, Bridges, Collections of the Municipal Archives of the City of New York.

curred without incident thanks to what realtors claimed was the high vacancy rate in nearby tenements. A decade later, the Manhattan Bridge leveled even more tenements and eliminated thousands of manufacturing jobs near Canal Street. This time, the Jewish quarter staged protests that wrung pledges from politicians that tenants could stay a few weeks rent-free. By jawboning the eviction process, city officials avoided confrontation. On the Lower East Side alone between 1895 and 1905, the great bridges, parks, and schools removed nearly 700 tenements that provided cheap housing for about 50,000 people. Despite legal and fiscal restraints, New York had forged the outlines of the greater city.\textsuperscript{23}

The Limits of City Planning

The tenement neighborhoods that hemmed the business district and mocked the City Beautiful were the new constraints on metropolitan improvement. Finding the right place for immigrant "colonies"
became the central issue for professionals in community work and city planning, who came to favor relocation somewhere on the outskirts of the metropolis. They were reformers who had an Emersonian faith in rural purity, read the essays of Christian socialists on model communities, and heard mass transit promoters claim that suburban trains (and cheap suburban cottages) would cure working-class discontent. But all this remained vague and sentimental until they found scientific reasons for why the working class should leave the central city.

The settlement professionals believed in direct democracy; they sought to deliver their research findings to the city fathers undiluted by cumbersome or corrupt municipal representation. As college-educated experts in urban problems, they wanted special access to municipal administrators whose mature horizons coincided with their own. Progressive Era reforms made this possible by centralizing urban power in strong mayors and plenary bodies such as the Board of Estimate. Ambitious incumbents in Gracie Mansion saw that they could aggrandize their power by appointing advisory bodies that could define problems, list permissible solutions, and close off further debate. Advisory experts naturally gravitated to their colleagues in the settlements, who spoke so intelligently for the silent masses. In the Progressive Era, settlement workers eclipsed ward heelers as the legitimate voices of the downtrodden.

The settlement professionals gave shape to an urban planning irrevocably affected by the business district’s collision with nearby immigrant quarters. The 1905 state census revealed the startling news that the population in the already crowded Lower East Side had swelled 14 percent in five years. Almost simultaneously, J. P. Morgan’s organization of a giant construction trust, George A. Fuller Company, signaled a new stage of downtown land development. Groundbreaking for the Singer Tower on lower Broadway touched off what architectural writer Montgomery Schuyler called the “rapid and bewildering” growth of tall buildings in the financial district. Overnight, skyscrapers, once the romantic subjects of sketch artists, took on a preternatural character and, like the thirty-six-story Equitable Building, threw shadows uptown.24

Blocking their way were dense immigrant blocks and the social settlements, neighborhood guilds founded, as Mary K. Simkhovitch once described Greenwich House, “on the right spirit of democratic simplicity & hospitality.” Through the settlements passed a pioneer generation of municipal reformers, social investigators, architects of public housing, and city planners. George B. Ford and Benjamin C.
Marsh at Greenwich House, Lawrence Veiller and Henry Wright at University Settlement, Clarence Stein and Robert D. Kohn at the Hudson Guild, and Arthur C. Holden at Christadora all learned firsthand the harsh realities of the immigrant quarter. Collecting data on tenement congestion, they proposed the first scientific standards for decent residential living. They concluded that wholesome working-class life required density limits of fifty persons per acre, maximum sunlight and fresh air, and playgrounds and community centers, boons for which no family should have to spend more than 20 percent of wages. By applying scientific, quantitative tests, by borrowing, in effect, from the vogue of economic efficiency, reformers accepted the real estate dictum of “highest and best use,” the greatest return on investment in urban land. Although reformers never applied the test to their own genteel neighborhoods, they did so on the Lower East Side, where expensive land and fifty-person densities required rents that no immigrant household could afford. The settlement crowd joined commercial developers, real estate brokers, and professional city planners in concluding that the working class had to give ground to capitalist expansion.  

Ambiguous loyalties were shown by Mary K. Simkhovitch’s experience in neighborhood redevelopment. As head worker of Greenwich House, Simkhovitch took an early and abiding interest in local improvement, although her reminiscences, *Neighborhood* (1938), suggested an almost passive response to urban change well underway. “We came to Greenwich House,” she recalled, “as the neighborhood was rapidly changing and the colored population diminishing.” On another occasion she remembered when Manhattan Borough President George McAneny (elected as a reformer in 1909) “told us of the changes that would surely take place when the Seventh Avenue subway would be opened.” Although her commitment to local planning meant standing with her neighbors against destructive influences, circumstances drew her to cooperate with realtors’ demands for improved apartments. The Village needed modern residences, but practical capitalists, such as her friend, Henry Morgenthau, Sr., despised of finding enough room to build on a paying basis. Morgenthau knew that outer-borough subway stops had transformed empty lots into real estate bonanzas. He proclaimed the merits of the large apartment buildings enclosing garden courtyards that his American Real Estate Company was constructing in the South Bronx. “The very irregularity of our streets made the whole matter difficult,” was how Simkhovitch remembered Morgenthau’s judg-
ment against the Village. But she continued to search for improved housing that her neighbors could afford.26

Simkhovitch’s first venture into neighborhood improvement, however, leveled an enclave of the poor. She recalled that as early as 1906, Greenwich House had petitioned the city to “wipe out” Minetta Street, Minetta Lane, and Minetta Court, which allegedly were the location of brothels and some 2,000 blacks. Simkhovitch started a campaign to get the city to enforce sanitary and bawdy-house laws, but concluded that the effort was fruitless. She turned to the common panacea, boulevard and park construction, and organized a neighborhood lobby to extend Sixth Avenue through the Minettas. Her crusade attracted realtors and moral enforcers eager to disperse what Pastor Edward Judson called an “unsavory crowd.” One ardent supporter favored wholesale redevelopment of Sixth Avenue down to Varick Street and leveling all the Minettas. Their “cheap property,” he added, could be condemned for only $1 million.27

Although Simkhovitch saw excess condemnation as an expedient, she would not rule out wholesale extension of Sixth Avenue later on. Proposals to ram the avenue through the Minettas were endorsed by a civic meeting at Greenwich House in the spring of 1912, and the area was cleared in 1914, about the same time that the IRT subway was excavated through Seventh Avenue. But the outcome was not what Simkhovitch anticipated. As she explained, “Rapid transit lines were bringing so much new land into the market that informed officials [including Borough President McAneny] were convinced that even in the proximity of the new Seventh Avenue [subway] extension and the proposed Sixth Avenue extension land values would not rise so as to prohibit new tenements. Nevertheless, the rise took place. The Minettas were finally developed at higher rentals than our neighbors could afford.”28

Considering that most experts agreed that clearance would bring higher, not lower, rents, Simkhovitch’s puzzlement seems disingenuous. All along, Greenwich House had worked closely with realtors whose improvements meant higher rents than working-class families could afford. In 1906, the settlement led the Greenwich Village Public Service Committee, which advocated the Seventh Avenue subway and street improvements that would displace thousands. The committee favored beautifying local boulevards by removing abandoned trolley tracks; it also favored the idea of excess condemnation. The committee’s work was soon absorbed by the Village Improvement Society, a consortium of local realtors and businessmen. Simkhov-
Creating the IRT subway and a new Greenwich Village, c. 1914. Looking south on Seventh Avenue, “cut-and-cover” excavations for the route of the Interborough Rapid Transit sheared off commercial buildings and tenements, displacing 5,000 residents. Village boosters expected that the Seventh Avenue improvement, along with the southern extension of Sixth Avenue through the Minettas, would stimulate a wave of middle-class apartment construction. Courtesy of The New-York Historical Society, New York City.

Vitch provided space and secretarial help; the realtors shaped the improvement group’s demands for middle-class housing.29

Seventh Avenue proved to be a boon for property developers and a disaster for residents. Subway extension and collateral improvements cut a swath that leveled 200 buildings and displaced 5,000 people. But neighborhood boosters cheered the 100-foot-wide avenue and the construction they speculated that it would stimulate. For all intents and purposes, Greenwich House had sided with parks and boulevards that were the leading edge of Village gentrification. Although Simkhovitch scoffed at the likelihood of rent increases, her settlement also benefited from rising property values. When the Seventh Avenue improvement inflated the value of building lots that she had purchased for Greenwich House expansion, she sold them for enough profit to acquire new facilities elsewhere.30
Greenwich House’s neighborhood mission also made a fundamental contribution to the nascent city planning movement—the attack on tenement crowding led by Benjamin C. Marsh. The Committee on Congestion, organized in 1907 by downtown settlement workers led by Simkhovitch and her colleague from the Henry Street Settlement, Lillian D. Wald, heard of Marsh’s charity work and hired him as committee secretary. Brash and headstrong, Marsh proved a genius in the propaganda campaign, which was climaxd by his exhibition of the inside of a claustrophobic dumbbell tenement at the American Museum of Natural History. The committee’s blue-ribbon lobby, along with Marsh’s tireless agitation, forced Mayor William J. Gaynor to appoint the New York City Commission on the Congestion of Population to investigate and prepare “a comprehensive plan” to relieve crowding. Marsh was committee secretary, but its ranks were dominated by politicians and realtors of sensible views, such as Henry Morgenthau.31

Whereas Marsh toured European cities and returned a true believer in municipal regulation of private property, the commission already agreed with Morgenthau’s way to solve congestion. He called for “an intelligent city plan” that would disperse factories and create “real homes” for the working class. Spokesmen for moderate change at the City Reform Club added that the authorities should encourage relocation of factories to Long Island, where the poor could afford New Law tenements close to work. When reformers explained that Manhattan was better suited for “office buildings, theatres, and the like,” Marsh sputtered that they planned to dig the Lower East Side “up by its roots.” Nevertheless, the congestion commission followed the promise of gradual housing improvement made possible by subways and private markets in the outer boroughs. Its 1910 report urged the city to limit the height of office towers and to encourage “the redistribution of population from the inner city to the outlying areas.” Restrictions on skyscrapers guaranteed the continued spread of the financial district uptown. In the economic contest between the business district and surrounding tenement zone, the latter would have to yield.32

The congestion commission’s views were soon translated into municipal policy by community advisory boards, which pioneered city planning in New York. The boards were convened by reform borough presidents, who sought allies from neighborhood preservationists who worried that congestion threatened commercial and social stability. The first board emerged from efforts by dry goods merchants of the Fifth Avenue Association to protect their fashion
thoroughfare from encroachment by immigrant garment workers. According to association investigators, “Hebrews” swarmed from nearby lofts at lunchtime, driving away the patrons of exclusive shops. The association tried numerous techniques to remove the annoyance. After the 1912 fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, it even supported state factory laws to restrict crowding and “reduce the noonday congestion of the sidewalks.” When this expedient failed, the association endorsed the creation of a special zone with restrictions on height and use within 300 feet of the avenue. The association expected that the restrictions would “make it impossible for factories to exist in the heart of New York’s best shopping section.” In 1912, Manhattan Borough President McAneny named association members to his Fifth Avenue Commission, which advised limits on cornice heights, factory occupancy, and “obnoxious trades.”

A year later, those who favored controls along Fifth Avenue allied with realtors and mortgage bankers concerned about runaway construction in the financial district to create a Board of Estimate advisory body known as the Heights of Buildings Commission. Condemning skyscraper canyons in Wall Street and rampant manufacturing in midtown, the commission endorsed height, bulk, and use protections for lower Manhattan, Fifth Avenue, and other endangered districts. But in 1914 continued economic blight forced Mayor John Purroy Mitchel to appoint a Commission on Building Districts and Restrictions to devise a system of comprehensive zoning. Over the next two years, the commission pored over property maps, reviewed new subway routes, and heard testimony from mortgage lenders, dry goods magnates, and community advocates before it drafted a five-borough zoning plan. Adopted by the Board of Estimate in July 1916, the comprehensive zoning ordinance was a landmark in the planned, scientific growth of the city.

Neighborhoods threatened by economic shifts did not need scientific reasons to preempt the zoning process. The Greenwich Village Improvement Society, organized to guide policy on Seventh Avenue, remained the area’s most energetic civic organization and the spearhead for citizen planning across the city. In November 1913, when Mary Simkhovitch invited civic groups to Greenwich House to trade ideas on neighborhood activism, only a few existed, including associations in Yorkville, Manhattan, and Greenpoint, Brooklyn. Most of them, like the Village Improvement Society, were veritable chambers of commerce committed to neighborhood reconstruction. When Borough President Marcus Marks designated the Village Improve-
ment Society as his Greenwich Village Commission, with Simkhovitch as chairwoman, Marks hailed "this new democratic movement, which will be one of a chain covering the Borough." The commission focused on what neighbors boasted was the "residential resurrection" of the Village. While contractors refurbished tenements into expensive six- and seven-room apartments, the Greenwich Village Commission trekked to the city zoning commission to plead for the residence-only zones to ensure the safety of this investment. During the first of innumerable occasions when locals rallied to preserve the Village, they drew a protective cordon around Washington Square, but not, sociologist Caroline F. Ware wrote, "its outer sections."  

Elsewhere, neighborhood groups usually ignored the needs of the greater city. The Murray Hill Property Owners Association, whose covenants preserved the midtown residential enclave, bristled when a developer planned a sixteen-story office building on Madison Avenue. Economic theory said the area should succumb to the skyscraper, but the association, as the borough president's Murray Hill Advisory Commission, got the zoning commission to restrict Murray Hill on the maps as low-rise residential. Chelsea property owners also refused to accept the inevitable. In late 1913, they formed the Chelsea Neighborhood Association to do something about the district's shabby housing. It called on the city to zone spacious boulevards for the high-class apartments needed "to keep Chelsea's people at home." With Seventh Avenue "cut through to the Woolworth Building," as the Central Mercantile Exchange put it, Chelsea would boast a business thoroughfare "second only to Broadway." Executives of Hearn's Department Store, for their part, lobbied the city to extend Sixth Avenue and turn it into a "pleasant promenade" with new lighting and motor buses.  

Whilezoners talked about scientific findings, upper-class moralism drove the process that identified neighborhood need. Convinced that "obnoxious" trades blemished the city, the zoning commission was inclined to drive all manufacturing, not just garment lofts, from central Manhattan. Through use and height limits (generally one-and-one-half times street width) on Madison, Fifth, and Sixth avenues, it would force the garment trade to move beyond Seventh Avenue and push less valued manufacturing to the outer boroughs, where operatives could walk to their jobs. But these moral concerns did not apply to the Lower East Side, which zoners kept open for business use (with a loophole that allowed 25 percent of a structure's floor space to be used for manufacture of clothes, cigars, printing, and furniture). Commissioners explained that manufacturing's in-
roads made it "almost impossible to restrict [the Lower East Side] to exclusive residential use." Their decision perpetuated what they attacked as the "promiscuous" mix of residences and factories. Without legitimacy as a manufacturing or residential district, the Lower East Side would remain in limbo for whatever commercial expansion would follow. By zoning enough office bulk for 100,000,000 white-collar workers, the commission made clear that it expected that expansion to mean skyscrapers. 37

City planners gave considerable attention to the congested districts, only to advise their steady liquidation. The First National Conference on City Planning and Congestion of Population of 1909, as its title indicated, took planners well beyond the complacency of the City Beautiful. But the meeting focused on measures of economic efficiency applied to urban land use. Realtor Henry Morgenthau articulated the favorite panacea, advising delegates that congestion would yield only to height limits, separate zones for manufacturing and residences, and rapid transit "to move your population away from the center of cities." At the second national conference in 1913, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and others called for comprehensive planning that coordinated the disparate economic activities of the city. Olmsted said planners had to allocate space according to the new functionalism, which assumed that office towers and retail stores gave the highest rate of return, and factories and tenements gave the lowest. The search for highest and best use convinced many planners to shift low-income neighborhoods to peripheral sites rather than tackle the housing problem where it existed. 38

City planning's evasion widened the gap between redevelopment and low-cost housing. Planners proclaimed broad fields for municipal action that ended up following the dictates of the private market and shelving low-cost projects. Professionals may have disparaged the City Beautiful for the hard-nosed City Efficient, but the exchange demanded that the working class make the real sacrifices toward regional productivity. Confident manifestoes such as Carol Aronovici's The Social Survey (1916) said planners should inventory the whole range of urban institutions, and John Nolen's City Planning (1916) heralded the coming of the comprehensive plan. But the profession remained overcome by the sense of profound legal restraints, as reflected by Edward M. Bassett's Constitutional Limitations on City Planning Power (1917) and Flavel Shurtleff's Carrying Out the City Plan (1914). Cities were counseled about the power to eradicate slums for such public improvements as railroad terminals, civic plazas, and boulevards. But building low-rent housing for

22
the displaced was a matter fraught with constitutional difficulties. The divergence encouraged city planners to dream of more civic monuments, while the housers went their own way.59

Believers in positive action for housing gained support during World War I, when ordnance production faltered in congested working-class districts. With national security at risk, government intervened in housing markets. States and municipalities, such as New York, enacted emergency rent controls. The federal government, through the U.S. Shipping Board, built low-rent housing near shipyards and arsenals. A new generation of socially conscious architects, including Clarence Stein, Henry Wright, Robert D. Kohn, and Frederick L. Ackerman, designed spartan yet attractive shelter. Although Congress earmarked the units for deserving workers for the duration, reformers took the Shipping Board projects as precedent for government-built “public” housing. Their viewpoint was articulated by economist Edith Elmer Wood, whose The Housing of the Unskilled Wage Earner (1919) argued that restrictive legislation had failed to provide decent housing for those who needed it most. Wood concluded that only government action—municipal condemnation and assembly of housing sites, public construction grants, and rent subsidies—could reach the third of the population who could not afford five dollars per room. After the armistice, Shipping Board units were sold to private realtors, but reformers refused to return to restrictions as usual.40

Nevertheless, urban reconstruction was caught between the old order and the new. Shipping Board veterans such as Robert Kohn and Frederick Ackerman anticipated government-aided construction of housing by the acre, replanned districts, and entire new towns. Excited about scientifically designed shelter for an era of mass production, they talked about creating what their colleague Clarence A. Perry called “housing for the Machine Age.” But the metaphor had contradictory implications, for the metropolis as smooth-running machine could dispel problems, even slum housing, without recourse to government intervention. Coolidge prosperity encouraged theorists to transform intractable slums into urban blight, which they said was a withering of property values caused by market malfunctions. Ordinarily, the theorists said, Wall Street’s voracious appetite for office space should have absorbed nearby tenement districts. With good reason, tenement owners expected imminent buyouts and stunted on maintenance. But when expansion failed to occur at the expected rate, owners let their properties deteriorate. Their stubbornness and ignorance (the theorists hinted that most were
hidebound immigrants) threw a noose of indifferent, fragmented ownership around the vibrant downtown. As Harold S. Buttenheim, editor of American City, observed of tenement owners on the Lower East Side, “their very attitude breeds slums.” Reformers recognized that extraordinary public authority was needed to break the stalemate, but an economic puritanism stayed their hands. Those who once refused to give alms to shiftless slum dwellers now opposed government action that rewarded indolent slumlords.\footnote{41}

By the early 1920s, New York had nearly all the instruments for urban reconstruction except the political will to get started. The tradition of model tenements for the worthy poor had been applied on a large scale with government-built low-rent housing in wartime shipyards. Displacement of the less worthy was already accepted practice in public works throughout the city, as was the expectation that the evicted would shift for themselves. New York had developed on the assumption that social mistakes in Manhattan could be rectified by cheap land in the outer boroughs, where the dislocated would find their own homes. An activist state, fortified with advisory planning boards, commissions on congestion, tenements, and zoning, had taken major steps toward city planning. Reformers claimed to speak for the best interests of the poor in technical areas, where they were not qualified to speak for themselves. A generation of municipal improvers had taken the city to the verge of massive renewal of the historic quarters of the poor. The political will would come in due course.