



THE METROPOLITAN REVOLUTION

*The Rise of Post-Urban America*

JON C. TEAFORD



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*The Rise of Post-Urban America*

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# Introduction:

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## *The Metropolitan Revolution*

“We are on the threshold of a crucial era of change in the urban way of life,” wrote the respected architect-planner Henry S. Churchill in 1945. “Vast disintegrating and destructive forces are loose on the world,” he observed, causing Americans to seek “new physical urban settings” as well as “new social and economic patterns.”<sup>1</sup> Although his vision of the future was not perfect, Churchill’s sense of impending radical change proved prescient. The American city was indeed on the brink of a revolution that would transform the metropolis and the lifestyle of the nation’s residents. During the following half century traditional notions of the city would become obsolete, and concepts standard to the understanding of urban areas would grow increasingly outmoded. By 2000 changes in metropolitan life would draw into question the meaning of such terms as “urban” and “suburban,” as language and notions appropriate to the world of Henry Churchill seemed to fall short of explaining the new reality.

In 1945 the United States was an urban nation, dominated by clearly defined urban places with an anatomy familiar and comprehensible to experts like Churchill as well as city dwellers in general. The metropolis was a place with readily discernible edges, its lifestyle sharply distinguished from that of the rural “rubies” and “hicks,” many of whom had obtained the benefits of electricity only a decade before. Cities were in the nation’s vanguard, enjoying the latest technology and defining the cutting edge in fashion and culture. They were the centers of commerce, manufacturing, entertainment, and intellect where the luckiest Americans made and spent their fortunes. Manhattan and Chicago were magnets attracting the ambitious and adventurous, those who sought to get ahead and enjoy the best in life. The vast expanses beyond metropolitan America were the “sticks,” the home of those who remained behind.

At the core of each of these urban places was a single central business district, the undisputed focus of the metropolitan area. Although segregated by socioeconomic class into different residential zones, all metropolitan Americans recognized the downtown as the center of urban life. It was the unquestioned hub of finance, retailing, office employment, government, and transportation, and Americans viewed the metropolis as radiating from this single preeminent center. Each metropolis had one dominant heart marked by bustling crowds and soaring skyscrapers that was perceived as essential to the urban area’s continued existence.

Metropolitan Americans not only perceived a single dominant focus for urban life, but also shared common space. The realities of urban existence forced the diverse elements



the populace to come into contact; it was difficult to escape the various fragments of the metropolitan mosaic. Because of rationing of gasoline and tires during World War II and because few families had more than one automobile, residents relied heavily on public transit. Middle-class men commuted to work on buses or streetcars that passed from middle-class neighborhoods through blue-collar districts, taking on working-class passengers, to the downtown area, a destination for residents from throughout the metropolis. Likewise, middle-class women shoppers traveled to downtown department stores by means of public transit, moving slowly through the various social zones of the city. On reaching downtown, they shared the sidewalks with businessmen, panhandlers, and working-class shoppers.

Metropolitan Americans not only shared common space, but had a common vested interest in urban governmental institutions. Although there were upper-middle-class suburban municipalities, the largest central cities still comprised a full range of neighborhoods from skid row to elite. The central-city government and central-city school administrators had to accommodate a socially and culturally diverse constituency, one that included all elements of the metropolitan social mix. Even residents of independent suburban municipalities generally worked and shopped in the central city, spending much of their lives within its boundaries. Their safety while shopping or working depended on central-city police and firefighting forces; the viability of their businesses depended on central-city tax rates and regulations. Despite the existence of suburban municipalities, then, the metropolis was to a great extent one city politically. Just as everyone recognized one common hub and shared common space, the overwhelming majority of metropolitan residents realized that the government of the central city affected all their lives and was of significance to the welfare of them all.

Thus in 1945 the great mass of metropolitan Americans still lived an urban existence. Although divided socially, they inhabited a shared metropolis and could not avoid day-to-day contact with one another. They were separated by ethnicity and class, but they lived in the same city. They were different elements of a shared urban world.

Over the course of the following half century, however, the single-focus metropolis disappeared and was replaced by an amorphous sprawl of population without a unifying hub or culture. By the close of the twentieth century, most metropolitan Americans commuted in private automobiles by themselves, or with co-workers of a similar social background, from their homes in one suburb to their jobs in another suburb. If they ever entered the central city, they generally did so along depressed expressways, their vision shielded from the dreary neighborhoods on either side of them. They shopped in enclosed suburban malls that excluded panhandlers and other "undesirables" and insulated them from the social and climatic hardships of the metropolis. The malls catered to the consumption patterns of the social class, and this generally ensured that they would be mixing with people like themselves. An increasing number of Americans were living in gated communities, insulated from those they did not want to see, walled off from the bothersome or threatening elements of the population. Moreover, as residents of suburban municipalities, they did not share a common city government with the less affluent of the central city. And their businesses, jobs, and favorite stores were not in the central city. What happened in central-city government or schools did not personally affect them.

The middle-class Americans who chose to avoid the suburban lifestyle and live in the



central city were most often those least dependent on central-city government services. The back-to-the-city movement appealed to childless young professionals who did not suffer personally from the poor quality of inner-city public schools. Central cities attracted these young adults as well as gays and others who did not want to share the American "norm" along the suburban fringe. In other words, by the close of the twentieth century, American metropolitan areas had become spatially and culturally fragmented, with enclaves for the middle-class nuclear family of father, mother, and two children; with special communities for senior citizens, where those over sixty could be isolated from the more youthful; with gentrifying communities for young singles and gays; and with incipient hubs of gentrification inhabited by artists and others who liked to deem themselves bohemian. Because of their poverty, still others were relegated to the areas no one else wanted. Moreover, these disparate groups did not need to mix on a day-to-day basis. Middle-class suburbanites remained in the outlying areas twenty-four hours a day, removed from the other elements of the metropolitan mix.

By the close of the twentieth century, then, the single-focus metropolises had disappeared. Sprawling metropolitan regions, which defied traditional notions of a city, had supplanted them. In Sunbelt Florida, a metropolitan region mushroomed along the Atlantic coast, an unbroken stretch of dense human habitation sprawling over one hundred miles from south of Miami to north of West Palm Beach with two parallel superhighways serving as the regional main streets. Metropolitan development spread over thousands of square miles in southern California, and only a small portion of the residents of the Atlanta metropolitan area actually lived or worked in the city of Atlanta. Across America, new hubs of production and consumption developed around freeway interchanges, and multiple commercial centers dotted metropolitan regions. The central city was no longer central. Most Americans lived in regions, not cities.

During the second half of the twentieth century, a revolution in ethnic composition, perception, and politics also transformed metropolitan America. In 1945 and during the following three decades, Americans inhabited black-and-white metropolises. The great ethnic divide that strongly influenced social and political development was between European Americans and African Americans. Other ethnic groups existed, but when Americans discussed the race problem, they meant the troubled relations between blacks and whites. Race was black and white. The black-white division underlay settlement patterns, political debate, and attitudes on schooling and policing. In the black-white city of the post-World War II era, the dilemma of race relations between European Americans and African Americans was an ever-present reality that could not be ignored.

From the 1970s on, however, a new wave of immigration, especially from Latin America and Asia, increasingly complicated the racial picture and transformed the ethnic profile of metropolitan America. By the 1990s, Hispanics outnumbered blacks in many cities, and Asians were a growing presence. In some cities, the percentage of the population that was black actually decreased as newcomers seemed poised to displace African Americans as the preeminent minority group. In Miami, Cuban Americans clashed with African Americans; in Los Angeles, Korean immigrants battled local blacks. Well-to-do Chinese newcomers "invaded" suburban areas, and in sharp contrast to traditional notions of ethnic invasion, they did not depress property values but brought new prosperity to their suburban communities. Asian American physicians, scientists, and engineers joined their European

American counterparts in prestigious outlying subdivisions, creating an ethnic diversity odds with longstanding stereotypes of suburbia.

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By 2000, then, Americans inhabited a radically different world from that of 1945. Metropolitan areas sprawled over hundreds of square miles without a distinguishable common center or clear-cut edges. The black–white world had given way to a metropolitan population of every shade, an ethnic world more complex and less sharply defined than in 1945. It was a world that Henry Churchill and his colleagues from 1945 would not have understood, a world that did not conform to their preconceptions of the city.

Although many commentators of the late twentieth century deplored the decentralization of American life while others were wary of the new wave of immigrants, America's metropolitan revolution reflected the felt desires of millions of people who enjoyed unprecedented freedom and mobility. The automobile liberated Americans from dependence on centripetal public transit; federal mortgage guarantees permitted millions of young white couples to escape from tenements or their in-laws' spare room and purchase a house and yard of their own; Social Security and pension plans freed senior citizens from the necessity of living with their children and allowed them to opt for gated communities tailored to their interests; sexual liberation permitted homosexuals to come out of the shadows and openly create enclaves for themselves; and a gender revolution liberated young women from expectations of early marriage and substituted the possibility of a single life in the central city. Meanwhile, liberalized immigration laws unlocked the nation's doors to millions of newcomers from Latin America and Asia, whereas heightened ethnic tolerance and civil rights legislation lowered the barriers to suburbanization for diverse ethnic groups.

Not everyone shared equally in the benefits of prosperity and mobility. Many had no choice but to take the bus and inhabit run-down apartments in crime-ridden neighborhoods. To an unprecedented degree, however, changing technology and increasing wealth enabled metropolitan Americans to pursue different lifestyles and carve spatial niches tailored to their individual preferences. Decentralization and fragmentation undermined prospects for a united metropolitan community. Yet the amorphous pattern of 2000 seemed to reflect the amorphous nature of American life. Metropolitan Americans chose to disperse rather than cluster.

The result was a world that even scholars and journalists of the late twentieth century had a difficult time comprehending. As business moved to the metropolitan edge, the struggle to label this new inside-out world in which the center was on the rim and the hub was increasingly peripheral. Some wrote of urban villages, others of edge cities, still others of technoburbs, and some settled for the generic post-suburbia. They knew that they were living in a world in which the traditional labels of urban and suburban no longer exactly fit, but they struggled to conceptualize the strange new environment around them. It simply did not make sense to people unable to escape the concepts of the past. Where did the so-called Philadelphia metropolitan area begin and the New York metropolitan area end? Was Princeton, New Jersey, a satellite orbiting around Philadelphia or New York City? Or was it an independent body, revolving around neither of the historic central cities? Was the large city of Virginia Beach a suburb of the older city of Norfolk, and what about the population of adjoining municipalities of Chesapeake, Newport News, and Hampton? Was Mesa, Arizona, a city larger than Pittsburgh or Cincinnati, a suburb of Phoenix, and, if so, what made Mesa suburban and Phoenix urban? And what about the adjacent cities of Scottsdale and

Glendale, both of which had over 200,000 residents?

—Similarly, the experts floundered in their attempts to categorize the new ethnic world. In 1945 the Census Bureau had divided the population into white and nonwhite, the latter consisting primarily of African Americans and a relative small population of East Asians, American Indians, and Pacific Islanders. A Hispanic category did not exist; Mexican Americans were whites. In the racial world of 1945, the categories of white and nonwhite worked. One was either white or not, and that was all that mattered. In 2000, however, the new ethnic world had destroyed the simplicity of past census dichotomies. The 2000 census gave Americans the option of choosing “one or more races” to describe their racial identities. About 6.8 million respondents selected this option, most often identifying themselves as white and some other race. Moreover, more than twice that number passed over white, black, Asian, American Indian, and Pacific Islander categories and identified themselves simply as “some other race,” although it was unclear what other races they were. Thus millions of Americans did not conceive of themselves as fitting into the traditional convenient categories of race. In 1945 metropolitan Americans knew quite clearly whether they were black or white, and if anyone had any doubts about racial category, Jim Crow laws in the South and less formal social restraints in the North would make clear their racial place in society. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the racial picture had become murky, and the validity of racial categorization seemed in question.

The metropolitan revolution of the second half of the twentieth century thus swept away the spatial and racial certainties of the past. The black–white, single-focus metropolis with clearly identifiable central cities and dependent suburbs yielded to a strange new world that traditional thinkers could barely comprehend. This was the world in which Americans of the early twenty-first century would have to live. This was the new scenario with which they would have to come to terms and whose problems they would have to confront.

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# 1 1945

“In the great world drama involving the destiny of civilization which is moving toward a climax, New York has become the center—the core—of the democratic system, carrying in its vitals germs which may threaten social disintegration, but also the seed of larger and better growth.”<sup>1</sup> So wrote Cleveland Rodgers, a New York City planning commissioner, in 1943. With London and Berlin in ruins and Paris humiliated and defeated, New York City was the hope of the world, the place where the democratic system would thrive or falter where social disintegration would destroy civilization or yield to enlightened policies. Moreover, the same could be said of American cities in general. As the United States approached victory in World War II, there was great hope and great trepidation about the future of American cities. The United States was an urban nation, and if triumphant Americans were to succeed in their mission to sell democracy and capitalism to the large ruined remainder of the world, the cities would have to overcome their problems and demonstrate unquestionably the nation’s greatness. With the defeat of European fascism and Japanese imperialism, New York City and its lesser urban compatriots were at the top of the world, but they had to confront their problems and create an even better future.

As war-induced prosperity dispelled the economic depression of the 1930s and American forces triumphed in the battlefield, there was a good deal of optimism that the nation’s cities were up to the challenge facing them. Despite concerns about blight and decay in the older cities and racial conflict throughout the nation, urban leaders were drafting realistic plans to remedy metropolitan ills. In a publicity booklet the Bankers Trust Company expressed the mood of 1945 when it presented New Yorkers as a people “to whom nothing is impossible.” According to the Wall Street firm, “New York has made up its mind ... New York won’t wait.”<sup>2</sup> Neither would Chicago, Saint Louis, Dallas, or Los Angeles. America’s cities were poised for action.

## Downtown

At the center of the dynamic American cities of 1945 was downtown. Downtown dominance within the metropolis was universally recognized, and most knowledgeable observers believed that a viable city had to have one command center. A southern California economist wrote in the early 1940s: “Logically, it would seem that every metropolitan organism or area must have a focal government, social, and business center—a heart, a core, a hub from which all or most major functions are directed.” Moreover

without a healthy, beating heart, a metropolis, like a human being, would sicken and possibly die. "The degree of success attained by Southern California in economic, social and political spheres," the economist observed, "is directly dependent upon the soundness and strength of the metropolitan nerve center."<sup>3</sup> Although widespread use of automobiles in the 1920s and 1930s had threatened downtown supremacy and raised the specter of decentralization, the success of a city still seemed to depend on the success of its downtown. In the minds of most urban commentators of the mid-1940s, downtown was the heart of the city, pumping necessary vitality to all the extremities of the metropolitan region.

Basic to the circulatory system of a healthy city was the centripetal transportation system. In 1945 the arteries of transport focused on downtown and funneled millions of Americans to the urban core. Railroads still provided a major share of long-distance intercity transport, and soldiers and sailors coming back from the war generally returned via rail. The rails converged on the urban hub, bringing millions of young veterans to giant downtown terminals from which they would pour into the streets of the central business district. With its soaring vault and noble columns, Pennsylvania Station in midtown Manhattan was patterned after the great Roman Baths of Caracalla and proclaimed to incoming passengers that they had arrived at the imperial city of the Empire State, a metropolis worthy of the corporate caesars of twentieth-century America. Nearby, New York City's Grand Central Terminal became synonymous with the bustling, jostling crowds so characteristic of the dynamic urban core. The Union Stations in Washington, D.C., Chicago, Saint Louis, Los Angeles, and other cities across the nation were likewise monumental midtown structures with great spaces that announced to travelers that they were in the heart of a vibrant metropolis. Although air terminals existed in fringe areas, the downtown rail depots were still the primary front door of the city, the place where wartime Americans arrived and departed from the metropolis.

Public transit lines also converged on the downtown, feeding a mass of humanity into the urban hub. In fact, the concentration of commerce in the downtown area was largely a product of the centripetal transit system that had developed during the century before 1945. The streetcar, subway, elevated rail, and bus lines all led to the central business district, making that area the most accessible to employees and customers dependent on transit and most desirable to businesses dependent on those workers and shoppers. As the number of automobiles soared during the 1920s, reliance on streetcars declined and the prospects for downtown-centered public transit worsened. The economic depression of the 1930s, however, slowed auto sales, and gasoline and tire rationing during World War II forced many Americans back on the trolleys and buses carrying commuters and customers to downtown. The number of transit passengers soared from 13 billion in 1940 to over 20 billion in 1945.<sup>4</sup> In 1944 the annual per capita ridership was more than 420 in cities with a population of over 500,000; the figure was 372 for cities in the 250,000 to 500,000 population category.<sup>5</sup> The streetcar or bus was not a little-used alternative to the automobile; it was an everyday necessity. And nowhere was the web of transit lines denser than downtown. The lines were designed to carry as many people as possible to the urban core, and in 1945 they were doing so.

Among the transit passengers were millions of office workers, for downtown was the office district of the metropolis. In fact, downtown was virtually synonymous with office work; all major offices were in the central business district. Every lawyer, accountant

advertising agency, or other business service of any repute had offices downtown. Corporate headquarters clustered downtown, as did all the major banks. The economic depression of the 1930s had reinforced downtown control of finances by eliminating many of the weaker neighborhood financial institutions that had been potential competitors to the central business district banks. Many medical doctors and dentists maintained offices close to their patients in the outlying neighborhoods, but otherwise going to the office meant going downtown. In major cities throughout the nation, gender defined the ranks in the corps of office workers; an army of male managers and professionals and female secretaries migrated each day to the urban core to earn their living.

The preeminent symbols of the office culture were the soaring skyscrapers. These behemoths not only reminded observers of the monumental egos of their builders, but also were tangible evidence of the inflated property values in the urban core. So many people desired to do business in the hub of the metropolis that downtown land values far surpassed those elsewhere in the city. To make a profit from their valuable plots of land, property owners consequently had to build up rather than out. Only layer on layer of rentable space would compensate property owners for their investment in an expensive downtown lot. Vertical growth became a necessity and visibly marked downtown as the real estate mother lode of the metropolis.

Nowhere were the skyscrapers so tall or so numerous as in New York City. It was the preeminent high-rise metropolis, where vertical movement was as significant as horizontal. In 1945 it could boast of 43,440 elevators, or 20 percent of all those in the nation. They carried 17.5 million passengers each day in trips totaling 125,000 miles, half the distance to the moon. New York's RCA Building claimed to have the fastest elevators in the world, transporting urbanites at the rate of 1,400 feet per minute, or two floors per second.<sup>6</sup> There were as yet no automatic elevators; instead, operators ran each car in the vertical transport system. When the city's elevator operators went on strike for six days in September 1942, New Yorkers became especially aware of the vertical nature of their existence. The strike affected 1,612,000 workers, equal to almost one-quarter of the city's population, most of whom were unable to get to their jobs in the city's multistory structures. Although rain, snow, and sleet could not stay letter carriers from delivery of the mail, flights of stairs could not. Thousands of parcels and letters piled up that could not be taken to offices on upper floors. One stenographer expressed the attitude of many when she told her boss: "I'm not going to walk up. It's not good for my constitution."<sup>8</sup> The skyscraper city simply could not exist without the vertical modes of transit.

Surpassing all other office towers in New York City and the world was the Empire State Building, rising 1,250 feet and 102 stories. The Chrysler Building also exceeded the 1,000-foot mark, ranking second among the city's skyscrapers. The most significant high-rise development, however, was Rockefeller Center in midtown Manhattan (figure 1.1). Constructed during the depressed 1930s, this complex of office towers, theaters, stores, and restaurants inspired downtown developers throughout the nation during the half century following World War II. Not only did it offer millions of square feet of leasable commercial space, but its gardens, sculpture, murals, skating rink, and giant Christmas tree display offered an oasis of civilized living in the congested core of the city. It was a landmark that many other cities would attempt to copy when redeveloping their downtowns. Yet none would match the success of Rockefeller Center.



New York City did not have a monopoly on skyscrapers. Each major American metropolis boasted a skyline that proclaimed the city's success and identified to anyone approaching the urban area the location of its commercial hub. Clevelanders did not let their rivals forget that their 708-foot Terminal Tower was the tallest building outside New York City. At 557 feet, the Penobscot Building was the most prominent skyscraper in Detroit. One block to the south, the exuberant Art Deco Guardian Building rose thirty-six stories, punctuating the Motor City skyline and earning the title of "cathedral of finance."<sup>9</sup> The Foshay Tower, Rand Tower, and Northwestern Bell Telephone Company Building provided Minneapolis with a respectable skyline advertising the city's commercial prominence, and in Kansas City, Missouri, the Power and Light Building and Fidelity Bank and Trust Company proclaimed the metropolitan status of that midland hub. Similarly, Dallas and San Francisco could each boast of two buildings over 400 feet in height, symbols of urbanity in the South and West. Although modest by the standards of the early twenty-first century, the skylines of 1945 were clear indicators that downtown was the single dominant focus of metropolitan life.



FIGURE 1.1 The vertical city: Rockefeller Center, New York. (Library of Congress)

Perhaps second only to the office towers as commercial landmarks were the giant downtown department stores. During the 1930s and early 1940s, urbanites bought their groceries and drugs in neighborhood stores, but for department store shopping and the purchase of apparel and accessories, the central business district was the place to go. From 1935 to 1940, downtown Philadelphia accounted for 35 to 36 percent of all retail sales, but in 1935 it held a 72 percent share of the general merchandise category, the merchandise sold at department stores.<sup>10</sup> Downtown had the greatest selection of goods



and the latest fashions. For anything but the basics, smart shoppers headed to the center of the city.

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Most of these smart shoppers were women. The downtown department store catered to women and did everything possible to attract their patronage. The motto of Chicago's giant Marshall Field store was "Give the Lady What She Wants," but every department store executive in cities across the country shared this attitude.<sup>11</sup> With millions of American men in the military and thus unable to staff the nation's factories and offices, the number of female workers rose markedly during World War II. Yet the traditional, and still significant economic sphere of women was consumption rather than production. Women were the shoppers, and the downtown department store was their mecca, the place to meet friends over lunch and buy the goods their families needed. This was especially true of middle- and upper-middle-class women who donned their good clothes, complete with requisite hat and gloves, and frequently made the trek to the core of the city. A study from the mid-1930s found that more than half of the women from Cleveland's upper-middle-class suburb Shaker Heights went downtown at least once a week to shop.<sup>12</sup> The great downtown department store was to many women what Wall Street was to the stockbroker, a bulwark of their existence. On the day the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, a matronly shopper from Chicago reportedly exclaimed: "Nothing is left any more, except, thank God, Marshall Field's."<sup>13</sup>



FIGURE 1.2 With the world's largest department store and the world's tallest building Manhattan was the unrivaled hub of the world in 1945.(Library of congress).

Marshall Field's, however, was only one of many giant emporiums attracting shoppers to the nation's central business districts. Macy's in New York City was the largest department store in the nation (figure 1.2). On 6 December 1945 it recorded \$ 1.1 million in sales, believed to be the largest amount for one day in any store in the world when there was no special promotion to boost business.<sup>14</sup> Filene's in Boston, Wanamaker's in Philadelphia, and J. L. Hudson Company in Detroit were all renowned as downtown merchandising giants. Cleveland's May Company claimed to be the largest department store in Ohio, with seventeen acres of floor space, although it had a number of downtown competitors including Higbee's, Halle Brothers, and the Bailey Company. On the West Coast, Bonwit Marché and Frederick and Nelson vied for business in the center of Seattle, and the Emporium was the largest store in downtown San Francisco. Although offering a more limited range of merchandise than Macy's or Marshall Field's, Neiman-Marcus in downtown Dallas enjoyed an enviable reputation as a purveyor of fashionable apparel and accessories. Each September throughout the war, the elegant retailer drew spectators to its annual Fashion Exposition Show. In September 1944, while American soldiers were marching toward Germany, Neiman-Marcus was informing American women that this was the year of "more hat, less shoe," "tailored gold jewelry," and the "flaring tunic suit."<sup>15</sup>

Women who could not afford gold jewelry would have felt uncomfortable in the precincts of Neiman-Marcus, but most of the largest department stores attempted to cater to a wide range of income levels. The basement store or budget shop offered merchandise for bargain hunters and the less affluent, who could not afford the goods on the higher floors of the emporium. Depending on the store and the locality, African Americans might be excluded or accepted. In a study of racial segregation published in 1943, a black sociologist reported that Atlanta's largest department store had "no restrictions on dealings with Negroes and makes no racial distinctions, except for the special rest room for Negro women which is located in the basement." According to this researcher, "Negroes are allowed credit, may use fitting rooms, and may try on any piece of apparel."<sup>16</sup> Many downtown stores in the South and its border states were not so broadminded. In Baltimore most of the principal department stores shunned African Americans. Only one downtown department store allowed blacks to try on hats and dresses. Baltimore's May Company channeled all blacks to the basement store, not wanting them to browse or be seen on the upper floors. "I ain't been downtown for over five years," reported one black woman in Baltimore. "I know they don't want Negroes, and I ain't one to push myself on them."<sup>17</sup>

In northern cities, the major department stores generally served African Americans, especially if they appeared able to afford the merchandise. New York City department stores had even begun to hire African American salespeople.<sup>18</sup> In Chicago, however, a campaign in 1943 and 1944 to encourage the downtown department stores to hire black saleswomen proved largely unsuccessful.<sup>19</sup> Throughout the United States, "untidy" women of either race might be discouraged from trying on garments, but generally the large downtown stores drew on a wide range of clientele from throughout the metropolitan area.

Even if one felt excluded and never shopped downtown, the big central stores influenced what one wore and bought. They set the style trends for stores in the neighborhoods as well as in the core. Neiman-Marcus determined what was fashionable even for women who would never enter the store.

Although the downtown giants remained dominant, there was concern about the decentralization of retailing. In the late 1920s, Marshall Field's opened branch stores in the suburbs of Evanston, Oak Park, and Lake Forest.<sup>20</sup> Cleveland's Halle Brothers pioneered the creation of outlying stores, launching five branches in 1929 and 1930. During those same years, a Halle competitor, the Bailey Company, established an East Side store at 101st Street and Euclid Avenue and a West Side branch in the suburb of Lakewood.<sup>21</sup> In the New York region in 1937, Peck and Peck launched a branch in suburban Garden City on Long Island and the next year opened a branch in the elite Connecticut suburb of Greenwich. In 1941 Bonwit Teller expanded into Westchester County, opening a store in White Plains, and the following year Best and Company tapped the increasingly lucrative suburbs with new stores in Manhasset, White Plains, and Bronxville. From 1937 through 1942, New York City retailers opened a total of twenty-four outlying branch stores. Moreover, immediately following the declaration of peace in 1945, Macy's announced plans for branches in White Plains and in Jamaica on Long Island.<sup>23</sup> Explaining these expansion plans in early 1946, the vice president of Macy's observed that "branch units of centrally located department stores are the inevitable result of heavy traffic congestion in downtown shopping areas and the growth of population in the suburbs."<sup>24</sup> Most major downtown department stores had eschewed branch development, believing that branches were a nuisance to manage and only drained business from the downtown flagship store, which was the principal magnet for shoppers because of its unequalled selection of goods. Many retailers in fact were preparing to invest large amounts in their downtown outlets; in its New Year's message for 1946, Neiman-Marcus announced plans for a \$1 million expansion of its store in the heart of Dallas.<sup>25</sup> Yet the words of Macy's vice president were ominous for downtown retailing. At the nation's largest department store, executives were aware that the urban core was flawed as a retailing center and that the giant emporiums had to adjust.

Not only was downtown still the place to shop, but it was a destination for millions of entertainment seekers. New York City's Theater District in midtown Manhattan was world famous, with its unequalled cluster of legitimate theaters and movie palaces, including the mammoth Roxy, with over six thousand seats.<sup>26</sup> Other cities could boast of less famous but still significant theater areas in the central business districts. The pride of Cleveland was Playhouse Square, with five theaters built in the early 1920s, four of them showing motion pictures in 1945 and one devoted to legitimate, live theater. In these palatial settings thousands of Clevelanders enjoyed entertainment fare from Hollywood and Broadway. The State Theater claimed to have the world's largest theater lobby, a gargantuan corridor decorated in a mix of Roman, Greek, and baroque motifs stretching 320 feet and embellished with four allegorical murals representing the four continents of Europe, Asia, Africa, and America. Two marble staircases provided access to the mezzanine, which opened on to the 3,400-seat auditorium. In the Grand Hall of the adjacent Palace Theater moviegoers were dazzled by the light of Czechoslovakian cut-crystal chandeliers, the richness of golden Carrara marble, and the magnificence of dual white marble staircases. The auditorium, with a seating capacity of over three thousand, was vaguely Chinese

style, the management claiming that it was modeled after the imperial palace garden in Beijing.<sup>27</sup>

Detroit also had its share of exuberant downtown movie palaces. Most notably the Fox Theater, with a seating capacity of more than five thousand, was an incongruous mix of Indian, Siamese, and Byzantine styles with gilded plaster figures of everything from elephants to Hindu goddesses encrusting the interior.<sup>28</sup> In downtown Seattle, the exotic Coliseum and Mayflower theaters demonstrated that the metropolis of the Northwest had its share of cinema palaces. Meanwhile, in Los Angeles the downtown theater district centered on South Broadway, with the Los Angeles, Orpheum, Tower, State, Globe, Pantages, Million Dollar, and Roxie theaters vying for patronage from entertainment-hungry southern Californians.

Many neighborhood movie houses also presented Hollywood's offerings to urbanites throughout the nation. In the largest cities, some of these matched their downtown counterparts in size and elegance. Yet most neighborhood movie houses were modest in comparison with the downtown palaces, and they were generally second-run venues. In other words, the latest offerings from Hollywood showed downtown at first-run theaters, whereas the neighborhood houses exhibited films released a few months earlier that had already played downtown. As in the case of retailing, the latest, biggest, and best were generally found in the central business district. Millions of Americans attended neighborhood theaters because they were conveniently located near their homes. Yet nowhere were there more of the latest film offerings in such a small geographic area as downtown.

Moreover, downtown was the site of the biggest and best in lodging. Tourist courts offered overnight accommodations to auto-borne travelers along the highways leading into the city. But the grim little tourist cabins did not rival the downtown hotels. If one wanted more than simply a bed and a roof over one's head, one had to go downtown. Catering to rail-borne visitors in town to transact business in the metropolis's unquestioned center of commerce, massive downtown hotels arose in every major city during the early twentieth century, the most elegant winning a nationwide reputation. The Waldorf Astoria in New York City, the Palmer House in Chicago, the Peabody in Memphis, the Adolphus in Dallas, and the Brown Palace in Denver were landmarks of the city center and, like the skyscraper and department stores, symbols of downtown's supremacy. Not only did travelers stay in these and hundreds of less distinguished downtown hostelries, but scores of metropolitan organizations held their banquets in the grand hotel ballrooms. The downtown hotels were meeting places as well as shelters for out-of-town visitors. They were places to see other people and to be seen.

The downtown hotels were also among the principal entertainment venues of the metropolis. Among their amenities were supper clubs offering big-band music and a variety of other performers. For example, the College Inn in Chicago's Sherman House was the place to enjoy the best in big-band fare. In September and October 1945, it hosted first the Lionel Hampton band, followed by the Les Brown band, with singer Doris Day, and then the Louis Prima orchestra, all among the premier musical groups in the nation. Florian Zabacko and his orchestra was playing at the American Room in the nearby LaSalle Hotel, and the posh Empire Room at the Palmer House was presenting its fall revue. If one sought further entertainment, one could try the Mayfair Room at the Blackstone Hotel or go across the street to the Stevens Hotel's Boulevard Room to enjoy its show "Shapes Ahoy!" with Clyc



McCoy and his orchestra.<sup>29</sup> That same October, Chicago's Congress Hotel opened its Glass Hat Room; according to a local columnist, it was adorned with a "large glass top over the bar, ... shimmering spun glass drapes, [and a] fan-shaped glass background for the band, tinted in changing colors by the special lighting system that ostensibly, at least follows the mood of the music."<sup>30</sup>

With skyscrapers, department stores, movie palaces, and great hotels, downtown was a zone of real-estate riches. The chief source of municipal revenue was the property tax, and in no other area of the metropolis was property so valuable and thus so lucrative to city government. In 1940 the central business district of Philadelphia comprised 0.7 percent of the city's total area yet accounted for 17.4 percent of Philadelphia's assessed value. Likewise, in the late 1930s, downtown Detroit contained 0.4 percent of the city's area but 12.9 percent of its entire assessment.<sup>32</sup> These figures were typical of the situation throughout the nation. With 1 or 2 percent of the land area in the city, the central business district paid anywhere from 12 to 20 percent of the property taxes. Not only was downtown the hub of office work, retailing, and entertainment, but it paid the bills for the city, subsidizing less fortunate areas with low property values. Downtown Saint Louis, for example, paid two and a half times more in municipal taxes than it cost in city services. With the profits from the central business district, Saint Louis city officials could cope with the imbalance between revenues and expenditures in the poorer residential neighborhoods. The single dominant focus of the metropolis, downtown was also the area that ensured the survival of city government. Without the central business district, there could not be a city.

The governmental institutions that benefited from downtown's wealth were appropriately concentrated in the vital hub. County government operated from the centrally located county courthouse, and in the heart of downtown city hall was the command center for the government of the central city. Moreover, in 1945 the central cities of Boston, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Detroit, and their ilk across the nation were clearly the dominant governments of the metropolitan area. Unlike in later years, when the number of people living in suburban cities or towns far exceeded the number in the central city, in the mid-1940s the bulk of the metropolitan population remained within the central-city boundaries. According to the 1940 census, the twenty most populous central cities were home to 63.2 percent of all the residents in their metropolitan areas.<sup>34</sup> Over 80 percent of all people in the Baltimore metropolitan area actually lived in the city of Baltimore, and more than 70 percent of the inhabitants of the Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Washington, and Milwaukee metropolitan areas resided within the municipal limits of the central city. In other words, the central-city government was more significant than it would be later in the century. It governed the great majority of metropolitan residents, and downtown's city hall was the preeminent hub of local government.

The metropolitan lifestyle of 1945 had, then, a single focus. The city center dominated work, play, shopping, and government. Even those who could not afford to attend a show at the Empire Room, who felt excluded from Baltimore's department stores because of race or who did not have a white-collar job in a skyscraper could not escape the influence of the single dominant hub. Its executives dictated corporate policy affecting workers in outlying factories, its city officials determined public policy, and its department stores guided women as to what to wear and what to buy. The critics for the downtown-based metropolitan daily newspapers told urbanites what movies to attend, and the columnists kept them aware

the latest developments in the swank night clubs. Although divided socially, ethnically, and politically, the fragments of America's metropolitan areas were drawn together by the common focus on the preeminent core. They were all satellites orbiting around a common star.

## The Black–White City

Despite a common attraction to the dominant hub, metropolitan Americans were far from united. Most notably, they were divided by race. Historically the black population had been concentrated in the rural South. But during the three decades before 1945, an increasing number of African Americans were seeking to better their lot by migrating to cities. In 1940 blacks constituted more than 40 percent of the populations of Memphis and Birmingham, 35 percent of the residents of Atlanta, and 30 percent of the inhabitants of New Orleans. In the North, they were a less formidable contingent of the urban population, comprising 13 percent of the populations of Philadelphia, Saint Louis, and Indianapolis and between 8 and 10 percent of the inhabitants of Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and Cleveland.<sup>35</sup>

During World War II, however, the flow of black migrants became a flood as almost a million African Americans left farms and small towns for life in industrial centers. With industry operating at full capacity to fill the Allied war needs and millions of men and women serving in the military, urban businesses were desperate for workers. Blacks sought to take advantage of the labor shortage. Between 1940 and 1944, the nonwhite population of the Detroit area increased by 83,000, or 47 percent. An estimated 60,000 to 75,000 African Americans moved to Chicago. On the West Coast, where the black population had been relatively small before the war, the rise was even more spectacular. The number of African Americans rose 78 percent in Los Angeles, 227 percent in the San Francisco Bay area, and 438 percent in metropolitan Portland.<sup>36</sup> In 1944 the Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal titled his study of race in the United States *The American Dilemma*. At the close of World War II, it was becoming more specifically an urban dilemma.

The move to the city, however, did not free African Americans from the long-standing restraints of racial segregation and discrimination. In southern cities, they were required to sit at the back of streetcars and buses, the front being reserved for whites. Railroad stations had separate black and white waiting rooms, and African American children were relegated to separate educational facilities, being forbidden by law to attend school with white students. Cities maintained special African American branches of public libraries, and in Atlanta blacks were not permitted to use any books in the main city library or the other white branches, even through interlibrary loans.<sup>37</sup> The criminal justice system was designed to keep blacks in an inferior position. African Americans generally could not serve on juries, and the white police force reportedly ignored the legal rights of black suspects. According to an African American newspaper editor, "When they arrest a Negro and take him to jail they usually beat him up. It just seems to be a practice here."<sup>38</sup> Houston employed five African American policemen who could hold whites but not arrest them. They were hired to patrol the black neighborhoods that white officers sought to avoid. One black leader explained, "The white police used to run in these Negro sections, but so many of them ran into bulle



that they couldn't find who fired, they had to put Negroes out in these places."<sup>39</sup>

Racial segregation was, then, pervasive in the urban South. A 1943 study of segregation stated uncategorically, "No Negroes are accommodated in any hotel in the South that receives white patronage." Similarly, it reported: "Cafes catering to whites frequently have a side or back entrance for Negroes, and they are served at a table in the kitchen."<sup>40</sup> At lunch counters serving whites, blacks could not sit down but could only order food to carry out. In theaters attended by whites, blacks were restricted to seats in the balcony, although by the 1940s there were a number of movie houses catering solely to African Americans. Southern blacks seemed to prefer attending these African American theaters rather than suffer the indignity of a seat in the balcony "crow's roost" of a white movie house. Some Atlanta office buildings had separate elevators for blacks, as did the courthouse in Birmingham.<sup>41</sup>

Segregation was less common in the North, and blacks could sit next to whites on public transit and use the same waiting rooms as whites. In 1945 a study of black life in Chicago reported that "by 1935 discrimination against Negroes in downtown theaters was virtually non-existent and only a few neighborhood houses tried to Jim-Crow Negroes." Yet other businesses did discriminate. The same study found that Chicago's roller-skating rinks, dance halls, and bowling alleys enforced a strict color line, and the city's hotel managers did not "sanction the use of hotel facilities by Negroes, particularly sleeping accommodations." This was true in other cities as well. In 1942 the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers Union moved its convention site from Indianapolis to Cleveland because Indianapolis hotels refused to house black union members, and the following year the United Auto Workers Union shifted its annual meeting from Saint Louis to Buffalo because Saint Louis hotels likewise would not accommodate African American delegates.<sup>43</sup> Hotels might make exceptions for distinguished black visitors. In 1943 New York City's Waldorf Astoria made an exception to its usual policy of excluding blacks by accommodating the visiting president of Liberia.<sup>44</sup> The leading hotel in Dayton allowed the famed black concert singer Marian Anderson to stay overnight, but, in the words of the manager, "it was arranged beforehand, so that when she came in she didn't register or come anywhere near the desk. She went right up the elevator to her room and no one knew she was around."<sup>45</sup>

Especially embarrassing to a nation that lauded freedom and was engaged in mortal combat with racist Nazi Germany was the state of black-white relations in the capital city of Washington, D.C. Blacks were excluded from downtown hotels, restaurants, and theaters. The restaurant in the Capitol was off-limits to African American customers, a fact publicized in 1943 by the ejection of a group of blacks and whites representing the Greater New York Industrial Council.<sup>47</sup> The District Medical Society refused admission to African American physicians, and most hospitals either excluded black patients or restricted them to segregated wards. Most African Americans went to the two public hospitals, the larger of the two being Gallinger Municipal. Yet the conditions at these hospitals were inferior to those at white institutions. According to a national magazine, "Gallinger Municipal Hospital puts the legs of its beds in pans of water to keep the cockroaches from snuggling up to the patients."<sup>48</sup> The public schools were also segregated, and those for blacks were predictably inferior. In 1946 the per-student load for black teachers was 12 to 30 percent higher than for their white counterparts. In the school year 1946/1947, the per-pupil operating expenditure for white schools was 160.21, whereas for black schools it was only \$126.50. The two leading universities in the city, George Washington and Georgetown, did not admit

blacks.<sup>49</sup>

No aspect of black-white relations, however, was as hotly debated as housing discrimination. Most controversy centered on racial restrictive covenants. These were agreements among homeowners or provisions in deeds that prohibited the sale or lease of property to African Americans. In the mid-1940s, they were most common in middle-income white neighborhoods around existing black areas and in newer subdivisions. Racial covenants were often products of neighborhood improvement or property owners' associations dedicated to preserving housing values and the ethnic purity of their area. For example, in 1945 a committee of owners in the North Capitol area of Washington, D.C. warned of the need to adopt restrictive covenants covering all the blocks in the neighborhood so that it could "continue to be the strongest protected white section in the District of Columbia. No section of Washington is as safe from invasion as is your section," the committee told area residents; "let's keep it safe!"<sup>50</sup> In a pamphlet on restrictive covenants published by Chicago's Federation of Neighborhood Associations in 1944, the federation warned that white Chicagoans should not have to explain to returning soldiers that "at the request of a very limited number of people hereabouts, we have altered your home and neighborhood conditions while you were away fighting for America."<sup>51</sup> White soldiers fighting for freedom, the federation believed, should be able to return to their neighborhoods they had left a few years earlier and find them as lily white as ever. Moreover, this was a widely shared belief. In 1944 at least seventy neighborhood associations in Chicago were actively engaged in the preparation and enforcement of racial restrictive covenants.<sup>52</sup>

These associations were ready to resort to legal action to bar blacks from protected neighborhoods. In Los Angeles, suits brought against the well-known black actress Ethel Waters and Academy Award winner Hattie McDaniel publicized the plight of African Americans attempting to move into white areas. Between 1942 and 1946, more than twenty racial covenant suits were initiated in Los Angeles alone, and an estimated sixteen were pending in Chicago at the close of 1945.<sup>53</sup>

Not only did whites oppose blacks moving into existing homes, but they battled any new housing projects that might mark the beginning of an African American invasion. The Seven Mile-Fenelon Improvement Association in Detroit led opposition to black tenancy in the Sojourner Truth public-housing project being built in its area. A neighborhood pastor expressed the views of his parishioners when he told housing officials that the project would mean "utter ruin" for many mortgaged homeowners in the area, "would jeopardize the safety of many of our white girls, ... [and] would ruin the neighborhood, one that could be built up in a fine residential section."<sup>54</sup> In the minds of many whites, black neighbors meant plummeting property values, a plague of sexual assaults, and doom for neighborhood aspirations. When in February 1942 the first black families moved into the Sojourner Truth project, a riot ensued between blacks and whites, resulting in 220 arrests and leaving 3 hospitalized (figure 1.3).<sup>55</sup>

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