

Introduction

In 2005, the *Plain Dealer*, Cleveland's last surviving daily newspaper, launched a slogan campaign that called on Clevelanders to "Believe in Cleveland." The campaign emerged from a plan hatched by *Plain Dealer* publisher Alex Machaskee and Stern Advertising head Bill Stern. The "Believe in Cleveland" slogan appeared on red-and-white bumper stickers, billboard signs, and newspaper, television, and radio ads that featured stimulating messages by Cleveland Clinic chief Toby Cosgrove, Cleveland Orchestra director Franz Welser-Möst, former Browns cornerback Hanford Dixon, and Case Western Reserve University president Edward Hundert. The slogan suggested a need to combat civic malaise, as though believing in the city were a simple but powerful step toward effecting its transformation.¹

How quickly the Forest City had lost its way! Only a decade earlier, Clevelanders seemingly had been brimming with civic spirit. National media lavished attention on Cleveland as America's "Comeback City." Sellout crowds filled the new, retro-modern Jacobs Field for a record 455 consecutive home games and, in 1995, cheered the Indians to their first World Series appearance in nearly fifty years. In 1996, civic leaders illuminated bridges over the Cuyahoga River and choreographed pageants to commemorate the bicentennial of the city's founding moment: Moses Cleaveland's landing near where the Cuyahoga emptied into Lake Erie.

The "Believe in Cleveland" initiative was not the first time the *Plain Dealer* had found it necessary to bolster local morale with an image campaign following two decades in which Cleveland's fortunes had slid. In 1978, in fact, Machaskee, then an assistant to the newspaper's publisher and editor, Thomas Vail, had worked with Vail to activate a similar effort called the "New

Cleveland Campaign.” And, in 1981, the *Plain Dealer* had given subscribers purple bumper stickers that read, “New York may be the Big Apple, but Cleveland’s a Plum.” The very existence of a “Believe in Cleveland” campaign suggests how short-lived Cleveland’s tenure as the “Comeback City” turned out to be, calling into question any assumption that urban revitalization was the logical, inevitable next step in the evolution of cities that had experienced decline in the decades that followed World War II.

Cleveland boosters’ efforts to will their city to renaissance, exemplified in the rhetoric surrounding Mayor George V. Voinovich’s seemingly pivotal election to office in 1979 and amplified by the “Plum” campaign, was hardly unique. The last quarter of the twentieth century was a time marked by great faith in so-called “messiah mayors.” Cleveland’s good press mirrored that of Mayor William Donald Schaefer’s Baltimore, where the James Rouse–designed Harborplace and the National Aquarium symbolized not only an enlivened waterfront but also a city on the rebound.² The vaunted role of public-private partnerships seemed to offer a blueprint for the salvation of cities wracked by more than a decade of urban crisis. Although late-1970s and early-1980s urban comeback narratives served as a balm for frayed nerves amid unresolved urban problems, these narratives failed to maintain their potency and therefore obscure more than they reveal about fundamental turns in the trajectory of postwar American urban history.

Believing in Cleveland proceeds from the premise that undoing the notion of decline and comeback as a sequential, unidirectional phenomenon requires closer attentiveness to how comeback efforts and metropolitan change unfolded in tandem and how, on numerous occasions, zealous boosters were too quick to declare victory. *Believing in Cleveland* removes the emphasis on decline and renewal as a linear process and treats decline and renewal as two simultaneous forces in constant tension. Focusing on the act of “believing” in the city’s future in no way denies the presence of an opposite outlook: that of doubting the prospects for progress.³ The reader will discern a similar tug between sanguine booster rhetoric and expressions of pessimism, not only between people but also within the same individuals whose private admissions sometimes do not match their public professions.

Put a different way, this book seeks to complicate understandings of “growth coalitions,” a term sometimes employed by urban historians to describe various amalgams of municipal and business leaders committed to catalyzing economic development in metropolitan areas.⁴ Commonly depicted as sharing a unified vision of the urban future, these so-called coalitions may have shared a general common purpose, but they did not always attain the degree of cohesion that marked Pittsburgh’s midcentury coalition that advanced along multiple fronts to attack that city’s urban problems. I find in Cleveland what was, at best, an uneasy alliance of widely varying interests, often riven with internal dissension. Thus, the reader should understand my

use of “growth coalition” as a convenient shorthand to describe development-oriented leaders and their organizations rather than as an implication of unanimity on approach or in support of specific endeavors.

Although this book does not relate a successional narrative of decline and renewal, “decline” is nonetheless a word that begs unpacking, for the concept, no matter how murky, recurs frequently in discussions about the metropolitan future, as a fate to be averted or reversed. To be sure, some forms of decline are indisputable, because they are measurable. Population, household income, tax valuation, number of commercial or industrial firms, and value of retail trade can rise or fall. Yet there is no simple metric to apply to perceptions. Some observers sense downtown decline in the replacement of high-end stores by discount stores. Others conflate demographic changes with neighborhood decline and, if pervasive enough, with a city’s decline. If perceived decline is simply part of a spectrum of metropolitan change, I argue that perceptions are nonetheless important triggers for actions that shape the courses of cities.

Likewise, the reader should understand at the outset this book’s use of the term “managing decline.” I employ this concept to refer to efforts to manage, or modulate, citizens’ attitudes toward their city during times of real or perceived decline. Available sources offer plenty of evidence about how Clevelanders responded to efforts to characterize the city in a positive light. Did civic boosters “believe” in the city, or were they merely doling out rhetoric, imagery, and high-profile projects to combat undeniable decline, or at least to make distasteful change more palatable? Although the historical record does not always enable parsing the degrees to which boosters truly believed in a bright future for Cleveland, organizational meeting minutes, personal correspondence, internal memoranda, and a trove of confidential interviews offer revealing glimpses of what civic leaders uttered when their microphones were switched off.

Many scholars have examined the subject of urban decline in its various forms. We know much about how suburban growth siphoned business away from downtown retailers, leading to widespread store closings in most American downtowns. Likewise, the suburbs offered attractive new single-family houses on affordable terms, which drained populations away from older city neighborhoods. Suburbia also provided the space that manufacturing firms needed for plant expansions. The departure from cities of retailers, households, and industries left behind shuttered storefronts, deserted homes on overgrown lots, and hulking shells where machinery once hummed.⁵ Decentralization depleted the central-city tax base, leaving fewer and less-affluent people to subsidize the services a city needed. For cities in the Northeast and the Midwest in particular, growing Sunbelt competition only added to the challenges of more localized metropolitan change.⁶ In addition to spatial and structural changes that produced urban problems, scholars have been very

attentive to the ways in which racial discrimination and responses to it reshaped the metropolitan landscape after World War II.⁷ We also know much about the prescriptions, some of them flawed, that politicians, planners, developers, and boosters deployed in response to measured and perceived decline: urban renewal, highway construction, tourism promotion, downtown beautification, historic preservation and adaptive reuse of obsolete commercial and industrial buildings, formation of community development corporations (CDCs), the use of tax abatements, code enforcement, managed integration, policing, and appeals to attract growth industries, such as health care and high technology, among others.⁸

Few historians, however, have focused on how concerns about cities' images shaped responses to metropolitan change. Likewise, few have moved beyond the assumption of a periodization of urban growth, decline, and renaissance to consider the tension between decline and renewal.⁹ None have done so through a detailed examination of a single city. Apart from a growing preoccupation with problematizing so-called ruin porn, few have devoted much attention to the role of image apart from its utility in building the tourist trade.¹⁰ *Believing in Cleveland* builds on understandings of how civic leaders employed rhetoric, imagery, and actions geared toward "selling" a city to tourists as a means of revitalizing it by considering the ways that boosters "sold" a city—seldom dissociated from its metropolitan area—to its own residents. The book posits that concerns about image were inseparable from those about the actual or perceived state of the city and surrounding metropolitan area but finds that managing image itself emerged as a key preoccupation in the 1970s. Even so, *Believing in Cleveland* demonstrates that this fixation grew out of problems that predated the oft-cited Cuyahoga River fire of 1969 and built on image-making efforts that, despite evolving to meet changing circumstances, were themselves decades in the making.

Why Cleveland? The answer is counterintuitive. Cleveland is an ideal subject for this type of inquiry precisely because it is not the textbook example of failure or success—or reinvention.¹¹ Detroit's extreme hardship and creative ploys to reverse its course, in addition to a generation of scholars inspired by Thomas J. Sugrue's seminal book *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* (1996), have in recent years made the Motor City likely the most deeply studied American city outside New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago.¹² Cleveland did not endure a collapse as thorough and stultifying as that in Detroit. It was not a city like Chicago, sufficiently large, diversified, and globally connected to foster resiliency. It also did not match the tourism-driven reboot of Baltimore. Nor was Cleveland a city like Pittsburgh, where an almost complete demise of the steel industry, paired with eds-and-meds and tech-oriented investments, provided a clear template for reinvention, although not unalloyed success.¹³ Rather, Cleveland is among the largest of the nation's old

industrial cities whose histories of postwar difficulties have been detailed far less in existing scholarship.

Believing in Cleveland resists the temptation to assign too much weight to the onset of either “decline” or “comeback.” Indeed, rather than dwell on when—or whether—the city halted its slide, this book focuses on statements, depictions, and actions that evinced faith in Cleveland’s future as well as how such portrayals or deeds played out and how they were contested at moments when no one could agree whether the city was improving or worsening. The symbolic bookends for my study are the advent of the longtime popular slogan for Cleveland, “The Best Location in the Nation,” which the city’s leading electric utility coined during World War II in the hope of postwar expansion of the market for its services, and the election of Mayor Voinovich thirty-five years later, which prompted local boosters to proclaim the arrival of a “New Generation” in a “New Cleveland.” The electric company’s 1940s slogan was less a response to decline than an effort to assure citizens of the city’s enduring stature as an industrial center. The company’s image campaign provides a useful prologue to concerns about decline, in part because the “Best Location” slogan soon became a target of derision as Cleveland’s fortunes deteriorated. Similarly, although the narrative of renaissance surrounding Voinovich’s rise took such firm hold that national commentators dutifully dubbed Cleveland the “Comeback City” for years, it, too, ran out of steam as the city’s difficulties again overtook hopefulness. This book demonstrates that neither slogan described reality as much as aspiration. Just as Cleveland was never truly the best location, it also never truly came back.

Believing in Cleveland is organized into two sets of three chapters, with an intervening chapter that bridges the two sets. The first three chapters, which cover roughly the two decades after World War II, find a city and metropolitan area that were deeply divided, with the former generally suffering at the expense of the latter’s continuing growth. Even in the mid-twentieth century, long before the infamous river fire, image concerns suffused efforts to deal with the problems of the central city. The book’s middle chapter covers the four-year mayoralty of Carl B. Stokes, the nation’s first African American mayor of a large city, who campaigned in 1967 using the slogan “I Believe in Cleveland.” It views the metropolitan area as lying at a significant crossroads under the leadership of a man whose own symbolic power lifted hopes higher than circumstances would permit fulfilling. The second set of chapters picks up the story in the 1970s, during which Cleveland’s city-suburb division was wider than ever. These chapters explain why image concerns took on a life of their own. Taken as a whole, the book’s organization permits one to gain insights into why the city’s familiar 1980s comeback story obscures a long, difficult history of attempts first to avert and later to reverse or at least manage reactions to the problems of a major city in the emerging Rust Belt,

as a large swath of the Northeast, the Great Lakes region, and the Midwest came to be known in the 1980s.

The book's first three chapters examine three concerns about the state of the postwar city, focusing on efforts to reinvigorate downtown, rehabilitate neighborhoods, and fight deindustrialization from the mid-1940s through the mid-1960s. As the reader will discover, in all three chapters, the shift from expectations of ongoing growth toward concerted actions to reverse decline occurred in the late 1950s as the realization set in that Cleveland proper was losing ground relative to other cities and in absolute terms. Each chapter examines initiatives that boosters believed would play catalytic roles that might prove transformative at the city level. Chapter 1 concentrates on three downtown projects that were imbued with great potential to strengthen downtown and improve the city's image: a downtown circulator subway that was under consideration between 1943 and 1959, new convention and hotel facilities in the vicinity of the Mall planned in the late 1950s, and Erievue, the nation's largest federally backed downtown renewal project, which was unveiled in 1960. Promoters billed these projects as investments that would not simply bolster downtown but also ensure metropolitan growth. Nevertheless, as they watched downtown change in the 1950s, municipal and business leaders recast downtown redevelopment as a tool for reversing downtown decline rather than simply preserving a strong city center. The initial chapter also offers the book's first exploration of the doubts that needled even some outwardly bullish downtown boosters. Seen in this light, downtown projects were not merely facets of an economic development strategy but also exercises to lift downtrodden civic spirit. Regardless, the projects covered in this chapter ultimately faced sufficient public opposition to nix them or so delay them that they lost whatever transformative properties they might have possessed.

Chapter 2 introduces the concept of what I call "bellwether neighborhoods"—those parts of the city that growth coalition leaders regarded as a barometer for future urban revitalization. This chapter examines the emergence and evolution of initiatives to renew the city's East Side neighborhood of Hough between World War II and the Hough riots of 1966. Hough's battle with worsening living conditions, which began before its well-known 1950s racial transition, resulted in part from circumstances wrought by the war itself: a massive influx of newcomers seeking industrial work but faced with little available housing, as well as *Cleveland Today . . . Tomorrow: The General Plan of Cleveland*, a product of the wartime inception of a reorganized city-planning commission whose focus on urban renewal in the adjacent Central neighborhood unwittingly displaced thousands of residents, many of whom flooded into Hough. Hough's transformation struck civic leaders as increasingly inseparable from their ability to stage University Circle's grow-

ing importance as the city's cultural, educational, and medical district in the late 1950s and 1960s. As overly ambitious and woefully underprepared Cleveland renewal leaders tried to implement fundamentally flawed urban programs, they hastened the destruction of the city's most vulnerable East Side neighborhoods. Amid their floundering, they and other growth-focused stakeholders worked to cultivate the image of progress in Hough, but they were too late. A handful of ballyhooed "demonstration projects" only accentuated how far short the grandiose plans had fallen. The Hough riots prevented the onetime bellwether neighborhood, which through the 1950s had seemed a crucible in which Clevelanders might produce a cure for the "disease" of blight, from becoming the envisioned axle connecting the city's two hubs—downtown and University Circle.

Chapter 3 turns to industrial promotion amid the loss of manufacturing jobs from the central city to the suburbs and, increasingly, from the metropolitan region itself. Although the Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company (CEI) launched a Cleveland booster slogan, "The Best Location in the Nation," in 1944, it was more concerned with expanding electricity consumption by encouraging development throughout its 1,800-square-mile northeastern Ohio service area. The chapter closely examines the actions of the Greater Cleveland Growth Board (GCGB), which formed in 1961 to combat the newly discovered local problem of deindustrialization. The GCGB's efforts to brand the metropolitan area as the "Greater Cleveland Growthland" mimicked those of CEI. The Growth Board filled a void in the city government by meeting with heads of firms who, for a variety of reasons, were thinking of leaving the city. In doing so, the GCGB, like CEI, knowingly facilitated the suburbanization of industry. The chapter also juxtaposes the unabashedly metropolitan preoccupation of CEI and conflictive city-and-suburbs approach of the Growth Board with the city government's Gladstone urban reindustrialization project, whose 1955 inception produced disappointing results through 1966, the same year that the GCGB dissolved. The internal tension between conserving industry in the city and facilitating its drift to suburbia demanded an outward appearance of steering a dynamic "Growthland" in which plant openings, expansions, or retentions (whether in situ or through relocation within the region) might be scripted categorically as success stories, regardless of where they occurred in the metropolitan area.

Chapter 4 pulls together these three strands (downtown, neighborhoods, and industry) during the mayoral administration of Stokes in 1967–1971. Stokes's tenure began at a moment when many Clevelanders believed their city had reached its nadir, with the Hough riots symbolizing the depths of Cleveland's own urban crisis. His campaign rhetoric and mayoral initiatives aimed to renew Cleveland in every sense, making his tenure an important time to examine the tension between decline and revitalization. Chapter 4

argues that Stokes's program for civic renewal—which he branded *Cleveland: NOW!*—was an attempt to reframe Clevelanders' and outsiders' sense of how Cleveland was performing. It was also a way to buy time while Stokes pursued more difficult, substantive change that was sometimes politically challenging or even impossible to effect. The chapter diverges from the previous focus on one of three single topics over the course of several mayoral administrations in a two-decade span, instead taking a deeper look at all three topics during a four-year period. Doing so recognizes that, for all the challenges he faced, Stokes embodied and pursued a significantly different approach to advancing a city during a time of urban tribulations. The contrast between the relatively minimal attention given to previous mayoral administrations and that of Stokes may seem jarring, but it reflects my agreement with contemporary critiques of the so-called caretaker mayors who preceded him, none of whom seems to have shared the sense of urgency that Stokes brought to city hall. While Stokes was certainly not the first Cleveland mayor to view the city's image with concern, I argue that he was the first to be so attentive to image while also taking more earnest steps to redress the actual conditions that contributed to Cleveland's image problems.

The remaining three chapters continue to propel the chronology forward by examining the three broad initiatives introduced in the first three chapters, again proceeding from downtown to neighborhoods to industry in the 1970s. Chapter 5 resumes the story of downtown, tracing a notable shift from relying on large-scale infrastructure and physical redevelopment projects to creating targeted urban entertainment draws and vibrant corridors to link them. To be sure, these inclinations were not absent earlier, as suggested by recommendations in the 1959 and the 1965 downtown plans, but rather than remaining in books that gathered dust on planners' shelves, such ideas were finally put into practice. To relate this story, Chapter 5 introduces two concurrent efforts that emerged in the early 1970s, one launched in grassroots fashion from the cavernous ruin of a closed theater by a school district employee from Seattle and the other from the boardroom of a leading downtown department store. Both of them—one to restore four historic 1920s Playhouse Square theaters and the other to incorporate historic buildings and new in-fill development into a Settlers' Landing attraction in the Flats—reflected attempts to harness existing resources to recast downtown as a fun, exciting symbol of a renewed Cleveland. The chapter also examines the *Concept for Cleveland* plan of 1974 by Lawrence Halprin and Associates, the Bay Area firm responsible for remaking San Francisco's Ghirardelli Square. Although never fully implemented, the Halprin plan attempted to stitch the Playhouse Square and Settlers' Landing projects into a people-friendly downtown that could entice suburbanites and tourists to take a fresh look at the city. As was true of downtown in the 1950s and 1960s, new efforts in the 1970s to create an atmosphere of excitement in the city center after the eve-

ning rush hour not only failed to offset the continued decline of retail trade but also struggled against the push of concerns about safety and diversity and the pull of comforting, easily accessible suburban experiences. At best, the latter half of the 1970s saw downtown hold ground as its office growth and efforts to match the entertainment-driven attractions in cities from Boston to San Francisco partially offset its declining importance as a place with central appeal to Clevelanders who already were atomized across the broadly drawn “Best Location in the Nation.”

Chapter 6 returns to the concept of the bellwether neighborhood, exploring a shift from redevelopment to historic preservation and from the city’s riot-scarred, increasingly black East Side to its comparatively tranquil, heavily white West Side. In the 1950s and 1960s, civic leaders concentrated on remaking the deteriorating stretch between downtown and University Circle, a focus that persisted in the 1970s. However, starting in the late 1960s and continuing in the following decade, suburbanites began returning to a section of the Near West Side, which had been the separate municipality of Ohio City in the mid-nineteenth century. Attracted by its historical sense of place and impressive housing stock, people invested sweat equity and grassroots sensibility in an effort to translate their own restoration of Victorian houses into what they hoped might be a transformative back-to-the-city movement in the spirit of Beacon Hill, Society Hill, and Georgetown. However, the Ohio City renaissance had limited capacity as the prototype for an expanding back-to-the-city movement that might enable Clevelanders and outsiders to see beyond the city’s troubled East Side neighborhoods. Beyond the drag exerted by a nationally lagging local economy, those who saw Ohio City as a bellwether for reshaping Cleveland’s future were frustrated by the fact that not everyone in the neighborhood shared their vision or cared about the city’s image. At best, in the 1970s, Ohio City was a fictive overlay of upper-middle-class white homeowners seeking to conjure an imagined Victorian past in a larger neighborhood whose mostly Appalachian or Puerto Rican renter residents continued to call it the Near West Side. Local media used the moniker “Ohio City” when touting new investment in revitalization, but they called it “the Near West Side” when engaging in frank discussions of such problems as drug abuse, arson, poverty, and interethnic strife. The Ohio City renaissance catalyzed neither a convincing reversal of Cleveland’s neighborhood struggles nor of the Near West Side’s ongoing population loss.

Chapter 7 returns to the problem of deindustrialization in the 1970s. Municipal and business leaders continued to try against growing odds to attract and retain manufacturing plants, but they also tried to adapt to the sort of economic transformation that was occurring in many older cities of the Northeast and the Midwest as a result of foreign competition and increasing corporate pressures to seek cheaper sources of labor and modern-

ized plants with labor-saving innovations. Concurrently, Cleveland leaders saw the need to reshape how Clevelanders dealt with these wrenching changes, encouraging them to embrace a future dominated by the service sector. Hoping to bolster the city's lingering heavy industrial presence and third-ranked Fortune 1000 headquarters concentration, boosters greatly expanded their promotion of the city's arts, culture, and recreation as hooks to entice corporate headquarters and high-technology research labs.

Doing so, however, required escaping the gravity of more than an ossified business establishment and its deep enmeshment in an old economy dominated by iron-ore shipping, steel, and heavy machinery in a time when nimbler competitors on the coasts offered "brainpower" for space-age electronics and the South beckoned with nonunion labor and other cost-saving inducements for basic manufacturing. To attract or retain headquarters, offices, and research centers also required grappling with Cleveland's worsening national image as a city beset by problems. Of course, most of Cleveland's problems also were the problems of most older cities, but Cleveland emerged as the object of cruel jokes, especially following the 1969 river fire, and struggled against a seemingly endless onslaught of embarrassments over the ensuing decade.

As Chapter 7 demonstrates, image rehabilitation became an important activity for business leaders. Cleveland boosters crafted a new ad campaign in 1974 that proclaimed that "The Best Things in Life Are Here," a considerable departure from the self-assured boast of being "The Best Location in the Nation." The chapter considers this campaign, aimed at both corporate decision makers and Clevelanders, in the context of the city's ongoing economic slide and image struggles. It also shows how boosters had to adjust their approach by 1978 to offset the deleterious effects of a nationally publicized clash between big business interests and Dennis J. Kucinich, a brash mayor whose populist, David-versus-Goliath appeal was rooted in his distaste for business-dominated development agendas and a seeming willingness to disrupt them at any cost. By the late 1970s, any Cleveland image campaign that promised the best of anything was untenable, so boosters began to craft the image of a "New Generation" of public-private cooperation to propel the city forward. However, as the closing chapter argues, such a message struggled amid a continuing downward spiral of problems ranging from corporate headquarters' departures to the first municipal default since the Great Depression.

The Epilogue briefly surveys the so-called comeback during Voinovich's mayoral administration and its unraveling late in his successor Michael White's tenure. It also circles back to the problem of searching for a pivot point in the city's fortunes. It notes the limits of the 1980s turnaround and ends with a cautionary note in connection to the most recent spate of good news surrounding Cleveland's downtown boom, sports successes, unprece-

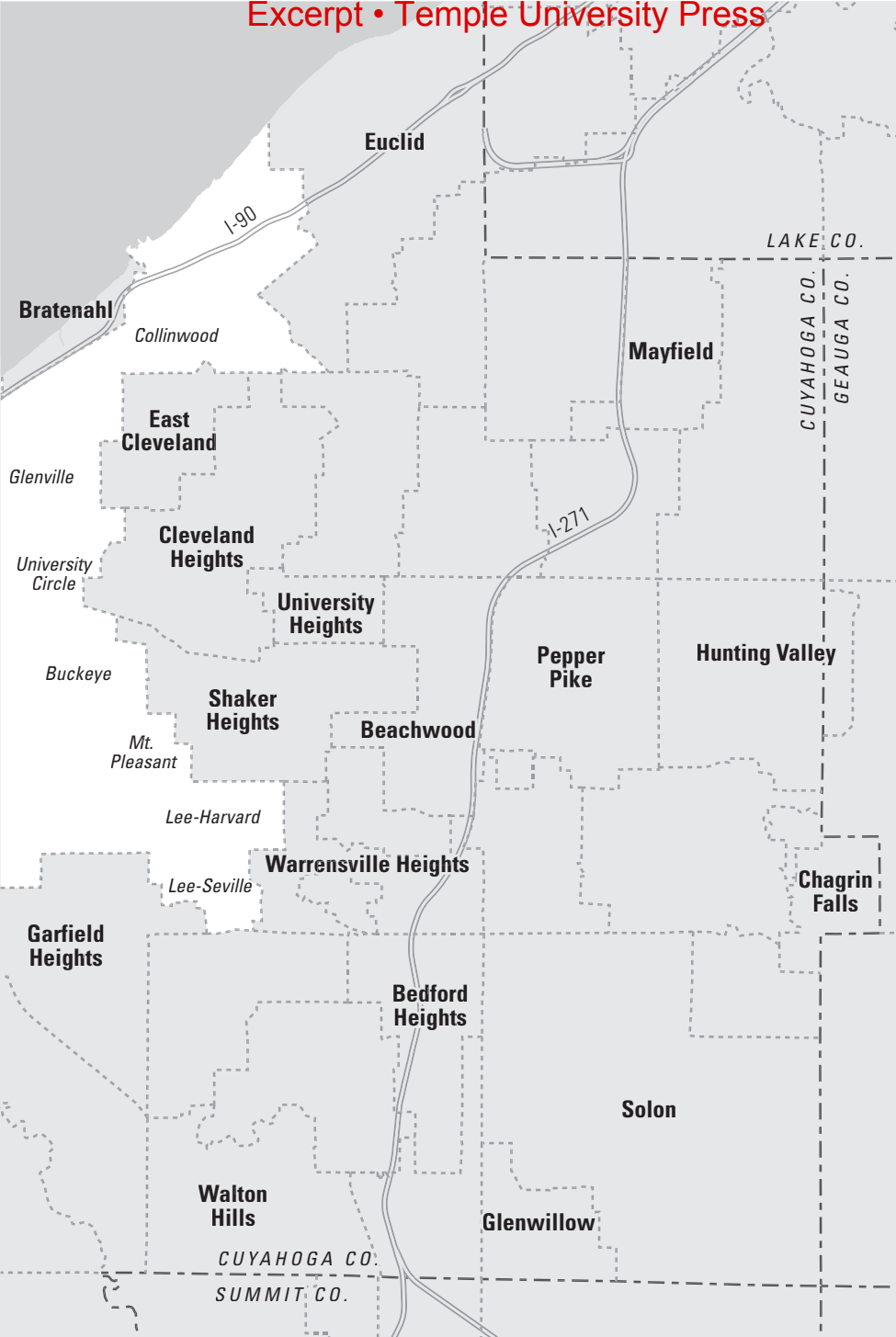
dented investments in arts and culture, burgeoning health care sector, and neighborhood renewal driven by millennials and food culture.

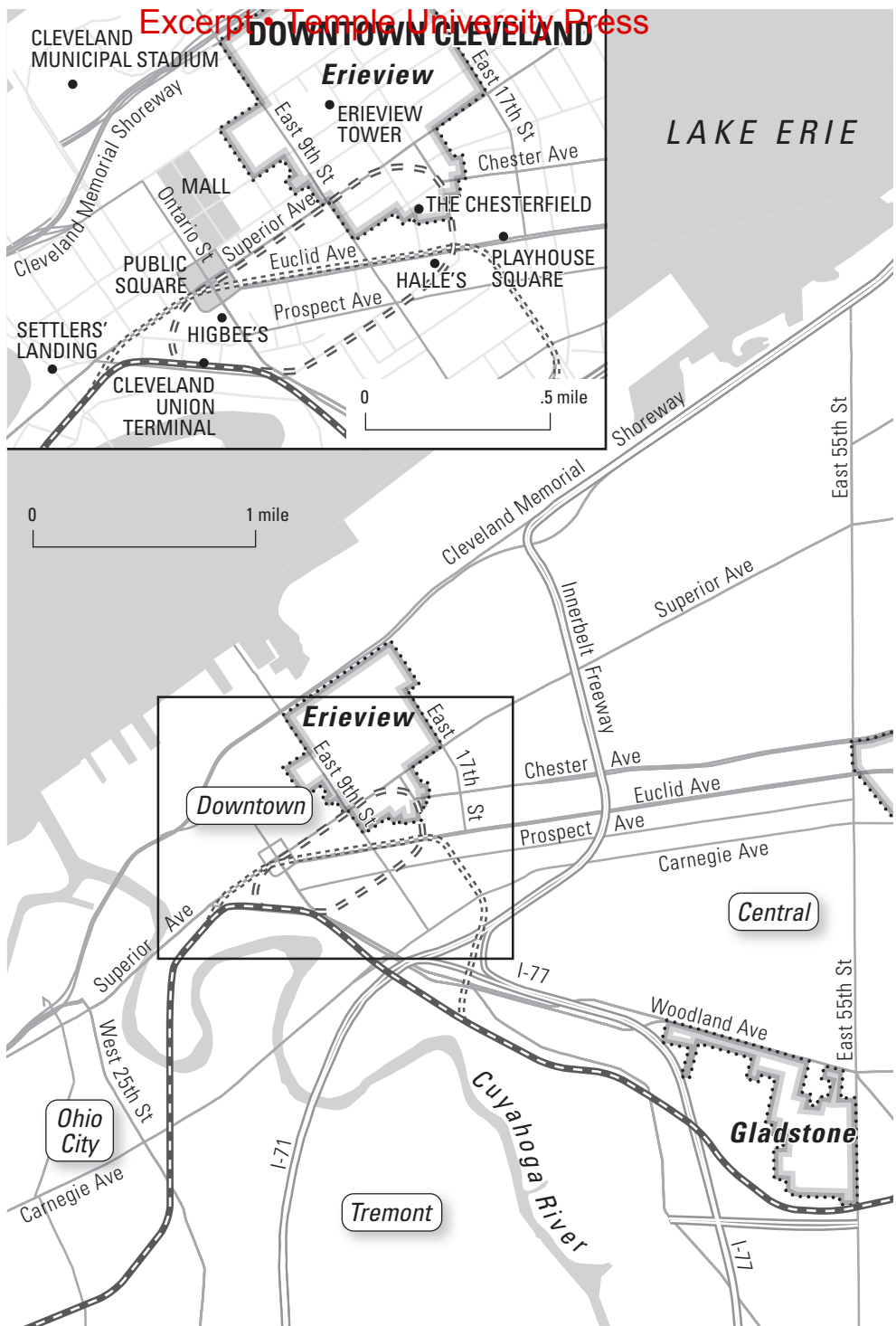
Believing in Cleveland is, in net, a retelling of the recent history of a city that entered the postwar period as America's "Sixth City," then lost ground to its suburbs, and ultimately (with its suburbs) fell back as a metropolitan region during a period of robust national growth. Like many cities across the Great Lakes region, Cleveland was a city whose leaders faced broad challenges that forced them to manage its decline or, perhaps more accurately, to manage perceptions of metropolitan transformations that produced spatially differentiated outcomes—winners and losers. Rather than a story of decline, it is a story of resilience. Whether Clevelanders learned to "believe" in Cleveland, they consumed a steady stream of assurances that their city was still great. And, whenever Cleveland fell short, boosters were there to sell glimpses of a future worth believing in.

Excerpt • Temple University Press



Cleveland Metropolitan Area. (Map by Nat Case, INCASE LLC. Municipal boundaries derived from data © OpenStreetMap contributors.)





Cleveland—Central City. (Map by Nat Case, INCase LLC. Municipal boundaries derived from data © OpenStreetMap contributors.)

