

Introduction

On September 10, 2001, in downtown Cincinnati, Ohio, local civil rights activists, ministers, and community leaders—newly organized as the Coalition for a Just Cincinnati—held a press conference proclaiming a “Cincinnati boycott against economic apartheid.” In a public statement, the group declared, “First and foremost, we call for a boycott of the Cincinnati metropolitan area by conventions, tourists, and other travelers.” The group went on to call for a boycott of all the city’s downtown businesses and closed with an appeal to potential tourists. “Make things right in Cincinnati!” the statement urged. “Withhold your dollars from the city. Economic pressure will force the city’s leaders to find solutions. Our friends all over the country, all over the world can help us make Cincinnati a prosperous, safe and welcoming city for all its citizens.”¹

The boycott announcement was the culmination of a turbulent summer for the city; in early April 2001, a Cincinnati police officer shot and killed an unarmed nineteen-year-old black man during pursuit following an attempted arrest. The shooting was the fourth killing of an African American male by Cincinnati police over the course of six months and the fifteenth since 1995. Despite clear evidence of malfeasance in many of the cases, city police officers had been cleared of all wrongdoing.² As word spread of the latest death, simmering racial tensions boiled over into violent action, and hundreds of residents of Over-the-Rhine, the city’s predominantly African American inner-city neighborhood, vented their anger and frustration in several days of riots and looting. National media broadcast images of the

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riots and the city's efforts to quell them, which eventually included the establishment of a citywide curfew and more than 280 arrests. The end of the riots, however, did not bring an end to protest—throughout the summer, civil rights leaders called for reform in the city police department, cessation of documented racial profiling, and independent outside review of police department practices in the future.

The boycott of downtown tourism might have seemed an odd strategy given the Coalition for a Just Cincinnati's central concern of police-community relations. But viewed in the historical context of Cincinnati's postwar development, it made perfect sense. The group understood that by targeting the city's tourist industry, they were striking at one of the pillars of the city's economy. Indeed, the city's economic development strategy in the postwar era had closely tied its fortunes to that of the tourist industry, as city officials regularly elected to use precious municipal funds to subsidize the city's convention center, hotels, stadiums, and other tourist-oriented infrastructure in hopes of reviving its downtown. Perhaps fresh in the memories of many protestors was the city council's effort, a year earlier, to grant a \$50 million subsidy to Nordstrom in a failed attempt to attract a flagship downtown department store.³ During the same period, the city also remained embroiled in debates about taxpayer financing of two new sports stadiums on the city's riverfront, which had exceeded original budgeted costs by more than \$200 million.⁴ The city's convention and visitors bureau had also recently publicly lobbied Cincinnati City Council for funds to expand the city's Albert Sabin Convention Center. In the wake of the April riots, African American community leader Damon Lynch III pointed to the city's emphasis on tourist and retail development—to the neglect of issues such as race relations, poverty, and unemployment—as part of the problem facing the city. "We talk about the light rail, expanding the convention center, the 2012 Olympics, The Banks riverfront development. Let's get real. We've got racial problems. We can build stadiums. But can we deal with our human relations?"⁵

The Cincinnati boycott illustrates both the central place that tourism had gained in the priorities of urban governance and the problematic consequences of tourism development for the social health of the city as a whole. However, the events in Cincinnati in 2001 speak to changes extending far beyond the Queen City, changes that reshaped almost all American cities in the postwar era. Cincinnati was in no way unique in its pursuit of tourism as a strategy for economic development—the pattern of public investment in downtown tourism occurred in cities throughout the nation, beginning in the 1950s and accelerating rapidly by the 1970s. The recent craze for downtown casino development suggests this trend is unlikely to abate. Tourism constitutes a major portion of most urban economies today, and

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the industry is a top priority of elected officials; the attention given to tourism suggests it is an essential component of general economic growth. For two prominent examples, we might look to the response to the two greatest urban disasters of the first decade of the twenty-first century—the terrorist attacks on New York City of September 11, 2001, and the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans in the fall of 2005. After the September 11 World Trade Center attacks, local and national government officials urged Americans to visit New York to boost the city's reeling economy. Mayor Rudy Giuliani quickly (if discreetly) coordinated with the city's convention and visitors bureau to plan a new nationwide tourist marketing campaign. Such actions transformed tourism from a mere leisure activity to an expression of patriotism and solidarity with the city of New York. In somewhat macabre fashion, the site of "Ground Zero" became its own tourist attraction.⁶ Similarly, in the wake of the massive flooding and destruction of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans city officials and business leaders began talking almost immediately about reviving the city's convention business and celebrated the fact that the French Quarter, the city's largest tourist draw, was largely spared. One New Orleans tourism booster told the *New York Times*, "People . . . are looking at me funny, as if talking about bringing back music, or Mardi Gras, or the arts or football is frivolous when we're in the midst of this kind of human tragedy. But I think New Yorkers can relate. Just as it was important that Broadway not remain in the dark after Sept. 11, it's important that we start thinking about the future despite all the very depressing news around us."⁷ That February, national media celebrated the city's scaled-down Mardi Gras as evidence of New Orleans' resilience, even as tens of thousands of former residents remained displaced and much of the city still lay in decaying ruin. Once the New Orleans of popular myth and vacation memories was restored, the continuing struggles of the city's population largely faded into the background.⁸

Tourism's centrality to the contemporary American urban economy raises a number of questions. Why and how did tourism gain such prominence as a component of urban economies, and why did it come to be favored by political leadership over other possible methods of urban revitalization? What effect did the growth of tourism have on cities—politically, socially, and even culturally? Furthermore, what does the reinvention of central cities as tourist locations reveal about the function and meaning of the postindustrial American city?

Urban Tourism in Historical Context

While the explosive growth of the American tourist industry in the post-war period was unprecedented, it built on long-established cultural and

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commercial precedents in American society. In the nineteenth century, when sightseeing tours and leisure travel first flourished, nature and wilderness tourism captured the imagination of the well-to-do American. Visiting locations such as Niagara Falls, the spas and springs of New Hampshire's White Mountains, and later, western locations like the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone National Park provided Americans with an antidote to the growing pains of an urbanizing society and reinforced ideological convictions about the natural abundance and cultural legitimacy of the Republic.⁹ While foreign visitors chronicled countless visits to America's urban centers in travelogues and published memoirs, antebellum cities were not a prime destination for bourgeois Americans. The disorderly, sooty, and crowded American city was the place to escape, not to see.

An important exception to this rule was the most popular mass tourist events in fin de siècle American cities, expositions and world's fairs. The 1851 London Exhibition, featuring the famed Crystal Palace, initiated a wave of expositions in the United States that sought to imitate that fair's grandeur, spectacle, and celebration of Western global hegemony. World's fairs were enormously successful; between the Philadelphia Centennial International Exhibition of 1876 and World War I, world's fairs brought an estimated one hundred million visitors to American cities.¹⁰ The most celebrated, such as the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition and the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, have become fabled moments in those cities' histories (as well as popular material for scholars). Besides the world's fairs, which drew an international audience, many cities held smaller regional expositions that featured the host city's industrial and commercial products, musical performances, art exhibitions, and the positive qualities of the host city itself. Cincinnati, for example, hosted annual expositions from 1870 to 1888 that showcased new industrial technologies and portrayed the city as a place of "progress, economic growth, and civilization."¹¹ Tourism in this form was a method of celebrating the existing economic prowess of the city rather than a significant industry in its own right.

While municipal expositions declined in popularity by the end of the nineteenth century, other factors coalesced during the era to bring other types of visitors to cities. That era saw an explosion in the number of national fraternal organizations (the largest of them the Civil War veterans' Grand Army of the Republic), national corporations, and nascent professional societies. The nation's ever-expanding railroad networks enabled the convening of national and regional meetings of these groups and initiated a new competition among potential host cities. By the early twentieth century, the efforts of Progressive reformers and advocates of the City Beautiful movement added parks, monuments, and civic architecture that brought urban aesthetics more in line with the tastes of white middle-class Americans.

Concurrent with this urban reform were boosters' efforts to showcase the newly beautified city through the medium of tourist travel.¹² Inexpensive guidebooks, usually printed by local chambers of commerce, helped orient visitors to cities and boasted of the commercial achievements and cultural amenities of the metropolis, while private touring companies gave travelers a scripted and authoritative understanding of the city.¹³ Postcards featuring cities' downtown skylines, streetscapes, popular hotels, and prominent landmarks became standard mementoes of middle-class travel and also popular instruments for urban boosters.¹⁴ Tourism promoters of this period, writes Catherine Cocks, "believed that their campaigns for city beautification and tourism would inspire civic spirit and social unity."¹⁵ While Progressive reformers preferred to direct visitors toward indicators of modern aesthetic reform, tourists also often sought less formal and more colorful experiences in the various neighborhoods of immigrants and ethnic minorities. Such excursions to the urban underbelly afforded middle-class white Americans a chance to experience exotic cultures strikingly different from their own while sometimes also providing ethnic minorities with a new source of income.¹⁶

The advent of the automobile further expanded heightened interest in both urban and wilderness tourism. The refinement of assembly-line production made automobiles increasingly affordable; by 1925 more than twenty million automobiles were registered in the United States, a sharp increase from less than three million a decade earlier. Freed from the fixed routes of the railroads, middle-class Americans took to the road to go autocamping and explore the nation's landscape.¹⁷ Even the hardiest of wilderness explorers needed fuel and food supplies, and cities and smaller towns quickly took advantage of this potential market by constructing municipally owned autocamps on their outskirts that provided campsites, water, and sometimes bath facilities to travelers. These camps encouraged visitors to patronize the town's businesses while also confining and controlling sometimes-unruly transients. A 1924 Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce newsletter praised the city government for erecting an autocamp in Schenley Park, noting it had been "a complete success in every particular, bringing here for more or less extended visits a multitude of tourists who would otherwise have passed Pittsburgh by."¹⁸ Municipal autocamps soon gave way to privately owned motels, but the experience demonstrated the value of municipal funding of tourist infrastructure (in this case, rather minimal) for boosting a city's retail and service industries.

Few cities, however, placed a special emphasis on encouraging the tourist industry during the first half of the century. While hotels and travel-related businesses aggressively pursued more tourism business, a mayor's welcome speech to a large convention or the construction of a modest autocamp were

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usually the limits of municipal involvement in courting visitors. With the exception of the rare international exposition, urban tourism in first half of the century was largely incidental; it did not significantly influence the political machinations, public expenditures, or the spatial organization of most American cities.¹⁹ As John Jakle observes, “Cities in the early twentieth century made little effort to accommodate tourists as a special class beyond the provisionings of hotels and restaurants. Contrived attractions in cities were few. The city itself was the attraction.”²⁰ After World War II, however, the tourist industry, coordinated through chambers of commerce or the increasingly popular separate convention and visitors bureaus, became more aggressive in promoting the industry and lobbying for public subsidies. Changing conditions in the American city and broader structural shifts in the American economy created new conditions that made those tourist industry campaigns successful.

Tourism and the Postwar Urban Crisis

As detailed in Chapter 1, the twin forces of suburban dispersal and the economic restructuring of deindustrialization, overwhelming in their speed and complexity, wrought havoc on America’s urban-industrial core in the post-World War II period, which saw hemorrhaging population, dramatically diminished tax rolls, declining commercial property values, and once-stable neighborhoods turned shabby and occupied by increasing numbers of racial minorities and the poor. Urban political and business leaders—accustomed to solving big problems and navigating city hall or the corporate boardroom—confronted problems bafflingly indifferent to their powers. Volume upon volume of master plans, transportation policies, and economic consultant studies—thick, bound reports containing scores of charts, graphs, maps, and reassuringly certain typewritten statistical projections—offered some hope of a road to recovery. Such plans for urban renewal, however, often proved unrealistic in implementation or, far worse, brought new, unanticipated harm. The initial wave of postwar urban renewal, supported by federal funding and oriented toward the construction of public housing, private real estate development, and highway construction, failed to stem the decline of cities and proved to be largely unpopular with both urban residents and middle-class suburban taxpayers.

Hospitality industry executives, who had long campaigned for public subsidy for their businesses, sensed opportunity in the desperation of political leaders. Leveraging the postwar urban crisis to their advantage, they promised cities that the expansion of the tourist industry would provide the road out of urban decline, supplying thousands of jobs, millions in tax revenue, and attractive new downtown spaces. While reality often fell short of

these promises, cities across the country poured millions of dollars of public financing into tourist projects such as hotels, convention centers, sports arenas, and entertainment development. An alternative path of expanded educational programs, vocational training, and other social service initiatives could certainly have improved the condition of the urban poor, but such efforts also required significant, sustained funding and promised little more than the always-uncertain *possibility* of improvement of a standard of living after a lengthy investment of resources—a proposition difficult to sell politically. Tourist projects, by contrast, offered more tangible physical developments—stadiums, convention centers, festival marketplaces—that provided seemingly instant results. Bound by these economic, social, and political constraints, postwar urban leaders worked with a set of limited and imperfect choices for improving cities. In one celebrated renaissance after another, urban leaders pointed to these flashy recreational developments as evidence that their city was reborn. By the latter decades of the century, tourism development came to serve, in many cases, as proof that the city as a whole was vital, successful, and worthy of visitors, capital investment, and media attention.

Tourism and the Rise of Conservatism

Urban historians have in the past decade increasingly asserted that postwar urban renewal policy must be reconsidered within a larger metropolitan context and reminded us that the bifurcation between city and suburb is an artificial construction that obscures the economic and political interdependence of the two areas. Furthermore, many of these same scholars have highlighted the ways urban policy was dramatically shaped by the political arc of postwar conservatism, which capitalized on white resentment over the funneling of government-funded social programs into American cities.²¹ Although tourism industry representatives injected themselves into conversations about urban renewal very early in the planning process, tourism did not gain its prominence within American cities until the late 1960s and early 1970s, at the same moment that growing resentment toward the ideals of the New Deal–Great Society liberal consensus reached political expression in the rise of New Right conservatism. This rejection of liberalism often had a specific geographic and racial character, as white suburban taxpayers vilified the Great Society programs, which they came to view as expensive handouts that benefited urban blacks almost exclusively. The Nixon administration began a shift of federal urban policy toward strategies that favored using federal funds to subsidize private development. As illustrated in the following chapters, this funding undergirded a construction boom in downtown hotels, stadiums, convention centers, and entertainment

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districts—in other words, the types of urban spaces typically enjoyed by middle-class, suburban households. Thus, while tourism development often required massive subsidy from public coffers, it did not experience, on the whole, the same level of opposition as previous urban programs focused on housing, social services, and environmental improvements that seemingly benefited inner-city minorities.

By re-creating central cities as places of entertainment and leisure, urban leaders linked suburban Americans back to their cities through the increasingly familiar practice of leisure consumption. When the cover of *Time* magazine in 1981 celebrated festival marketplace pioneer James Rouse by trumpeting, “Cities are fun!” it reflected an evolving standard for evaluating urban America.²² A city could be described as successful if it was “fun” to the primary readers of *Time* magazine—meaning that it catered to the consumer tastes and aesthetic preferences of the suburban middle class, who established their identity not only in purchased goods, but in recreational leisure. A family vacation to St. Louis’s Gateway Arch, seats at sporting events in gleaming new downtown stadiums, or experiencing urban life in festival marketplaces signified middle-class consumers’ available leisure time, discretionary income, and even cultural sophistication.

Postwar Urban Tourism and the Problem of Authenticity

Much of the foundational scholarship on tourism—particularly from disciplines such as sociology and cultural theory—was predisposed to view such development as undesirable or inevitably harmful because of its commodification of local culture and its hegemonic construction of desirable and undesirable aspects of that culture.²³ In the case of postwar urban tourism, this critique is framed as an analysis of the Disneyfication of cities, in which tourist development “presents its happy regulated vision of pleasure—all those artfully hoodwinked forms—as a substitute for the democratic public realm, and it does so appealingly by stripping troubled urbanity of its sting, of the presence of the poor, of crime, of dirt, of work.”²⁴ This poststructuralist critique of tourism—heavily influenced by the urban vision of Jane Jacobs, as well as Marxist cultural theory and Henri Lefebvre—thus works from the premise that tourism development results in an inauthentic central city in which corporate interests dominate over the people.

A historical perspective on postwar tourist development reveals the process to be more varied and complex than either side has acknowledged.²⁵ While the critique of inauthentic tourism development in American cities has much to recommend it (and indeed, elements of the same appear in the following pages), as a comprehensive analysis it has weaknesses that are perhaps inevitable given its Manichaeian rhetoric and simplistic narrative.²⁶

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First, most such critiques are frustratingly vague about what constitutes an authentic city that is threatened by inauthentic tourist development. In the critics' minds, the ideal authentic urbanites seem to be a sort of Walt Whitman—esque democratic mélange, a boisterous working-class multitude participating in an egalitarian civic discourse. In this vaguely defined dualism, definitions of authenticity frequently fall back on class, ethnic, and cultural signifiers: poor, nonwhite working-class people have an inherently authentic claim to urban space, and therefore changes to the urban landscape that attract white middle-class or wealthy suburbanites—even as transplanted residents—are inauthentic and evidence of corporate exploitation of authentic urban life.²⁷

A second and perhaps more significant problem with this anxiety over the tourist city's hegemonic inauthenticity is that it is profoundly and embarrassingly ahistorical. It often largely ignores the economic and political realities imposed on municipal governments in the postwar era and presumes to understand the goals and motivations of public leaders, with relatively scant attention to the archival record. For instance, the accusation that tourism's fantasy landscapes often co-opt historical forms to bestow cultural legitimacy on naked commerce neglects to consider the long history of such development in American cities and even in earlier European ones. From this perspective, the faux-historical baseball stadium or festival marketplace is not a recognizable departure from Jacksonian-era shopping arcades in the style of Greek temples or the baroque-Gothic cathedral of commerce of New York City's Woolworth Building.²⁸ While public spaces have historically had an important function in the American city, private investment and consumer activity have been its *raison d'être* and thus the principal driving force behind most physical development and redevelopment.²⁹ To say this is not to legitimize investment in tourism as the highest good for cities, because a large part of the story told in the following pages reveals the significant power inequalities that enabled, and were further exacerbated by, tourism development. The stories in this book, however, also reveal the *limits* of urban tourist development for imposing a specific "vision of pleasure" on urbanites and give attention to the malleability of tourist development to serve local people's desires.³⁰ While the growth of urban tourism unquestionably changed the function and experience of American cities, the process should be viewed as one of evolution—containing elements of change but also continuity—rather than declension from an elusive and nostalgic vision of the golden age of the city.

Debates about the rise of urban tourism and the emergence of the entrepreneurial city should, then, be contextualized both within the historical realities of the postwar urban crisis and understood as part of a larger general dialogue—and confusion—about the extreme demographic,

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economic, and political redefinitions of the American city occurring at the turn of the twenty-first century. The historian Michael Katz has provocatively suggested that while urbanist visions informed by the work of Jane Jacobs retain a great deal of value, such ideals are essentially backward looking and tied almost exclusively to the urban forms of European and older northeastern American cities. Such rigid and historically specific criteria may therefore be flawed as standards for the contemporary American metropolis. “Is the fault with these [criticized] cities or with the criteria?” Katz asks. “Did Jacobs bequeath us a definition of urbanism or do we need a different set of markers to characterize what makes a city—and a good city—in early-twenty-first-century America?”³¹

Katz’s question is a necessary caution about qualitative judgment on the evolution of urban form and function and a reminder that no platonic ideal of the city exists; rather, cities are shaped in response to larger cultural, political, and economic forces, even as they develop unique local manifestations. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the American city was dramatically transformed by a specific set of events: industrialization, the growth of railroad networks, massive immigration, and an influx of labor from rural America, to name only a few. By the second half of the twentieth century, new forces—the rise of the automobile and decline of mass transit, residential suburbanization (with its accompanying policies of race and class segregation), the growth of consumerism, a new brand of conservative national politics, and a globalizing economy that rearranged investment capital—fundamentally refashioned the postwar metropolis. Tourism development certainly changed American cities, and sometimes in very unsatisfying ways, but significant change of some sort was inevitable. Any evaluation of tourism’s impact must carefully consider the broader context of economic restructuring of postwar American cities and the limited possibilities for creating the “good city” out of the ruins of deindustrialization. As the planning scholar Peter Hall (certainly no champion of tourist development) has said about Baltimore, “There are those who say that the transformation of Baltimore is skin-deep; that behind the glistening facades of Harborplace . . . is dire poverty and hopelessness. That is almost certainly true; the question must be what Baltimore would have been like if these developments had not happened. And the obvious answer must be: much worse.”³² Avoiding reductionist simplifications about urban tourism is a necessary step in the work toward ensuring social justice and equity in the postindustrial urban political economy.

Tourism development held tremendous appeal as a panacea for cities in the Rustbelt; it satisfied the power players of downtown real estate development, enhanced the public image of struggling cities, and provided physical trophies for urban politicians, all while skirting the thornier and more

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tortuous issues of race relations, unemployment, housing, and public health. The rise of the tourist economy created a new economic function for central cities, encouraged private investment, and did bring a new kind of vitality to American cities. It encouraged the suburban middle class to continue to engage with their downtowns in a period when the complete abandonment of central cities seemed a very real possibility. However, the urban rebirth prophesied by tourism promoters has rarely come to anything like full fruition. The four cities in this book invested millions in tourist infrastructure, but their efforts at urban renewal have met with mixed results at best. Outside the relatively small boundaries of the central business district, many urban neighborhoods continue to struggle. As the Cincinnati boycott in 2001 made clear, the problems of the urban crisis have not abated—racial segregation, poverty, crime, and declining populations still plague most postindustrial cities, even those that bet heavily on tourism's potential. Economic growth did not translate into a more just city. As often as it succeeded, tourist development also amplified tensions of class and race within American cities, remade large portions of downtown to serve outsiders rather than residents, and established a perpetual precedent of public subsidy for the hospitality industry at a time when urban budgets were stretched beyond their limits. In other words, while many Americans found their cities had become nice places to visit, most would still add, "But I wouldn't want to live there."