INTRODUCTION

Can a City Be Planned?

Accident and then exigency seemed the forces at work to this extraordinary effect; the play of energies as free and planless as those that force the forest from the soil to the sky. . . . The whole at moments seemed to him lawless, Godless . . .

—William Dean Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*

Bryant's Questions

One day, a decade ago, as I was browsing old volumes of the *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide*, I came across a column that helped me see the focal question of this book. On March 21, 1868, the *Record* had reprinted an editorial from the New York *Evening Post* concerning New York's growth. The *Post*'s editor was the eminent poet William Cullen Bryant, a leading advocate of parks and public improvements for the city; it was not surprising that the local real-estate journal should have broadcast his views on the development of the metropolis.[1]

What Bryant wrote *was* a surprise. Entitled "CAN A CITY BE PLANNED?" the editorial represented nothing less than a call for a new science of urban growth and systematic landscape design. "We have always accepted without question the accidents of city growth as out of the control of scientific thought," he lamented. Now, however, "this reckless and idle policy is falling out of favor," and "thoughtful men are giving attention . . . to the important problem of how to plan and how to build a city so as best to accommodate business and promote health." The inquiry was still too new to have yielded firm conclusions, Bryant wrote, but he cataloged the questions that would-be planners would have to answer "with reference to New York":

> Towards what limits must the city grow. . . .? How much and what portions . . . will be required for business purposes . . . ? . . . Where will the rich man's city palace stand? Where will the laborer's family rest? . . . What avenues of communication are needed between

> the sections for business and those for residence? How shall the latter be connected with the great park, and with other healthful and pleasant resorts? . . . Ought . . . the city have . . . one great "Central Park"; or are a number of parks required in different sections . . . ? Can any means be devised to make such places attractive to those who need them most; . . . those who are suffering from the . . . close air of shops and factories?

Bryant praised "the recent report of the architects of Prospect Park" for "treat[ing] some of the[se] questions . . . with an enlightened foresight." What inspired him to comment was a proposal by Prospect Park's designers—Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux—to surround the Brooklyn pleasure ground with a planned network of boulevards and suburbs. If Manhattan were also to adopt such thinking, the poet urged, the city would "improve in plan still more rapidly than it grows in size" and "hasten the natural work of those unmeasured . . . advantages which promise . . . to make this the first city in Christendom."[2]

It is an interesting document. For one thing Bryant rehearsed every issue that preoccupied New York's city builders and urban reformers in the mid-nineteenth century. How to channel and contain metropolitan growth; how to array street plans, residential geographies, and spaces of public leisure; how to order the city streets physically and socially; how to design parks and other landscapes of sociability; how to ameliorate and regulate class inequality in a capitalist metropolis—here were nearly all the great themes of Victorian urbanism. Even more interestingly, Bryant wrapped these issues in a question that would not have been asked in America twenty years earlier. To be sure, intellectuals and builders had viewed American cities as plannable artifacts going back to L'Enfant's design for the District of Columbia and even earlier. Yet the *Evening Post* editorial was imagining a different sort of project. It defined "planning" as a participle: not simply as the creation of a city ex nihilo, a shape imprinted on empty ground, but as a process that "anticipate[d the] future . . . and ma[de] provision for [its] coming wants." Such a conception treated cities as dynamic spaces embedded in a world of dynamic growth, and it treated planning as a social practice embedded in history: "It is not for one generation . . . to solve all these questions and the many others which follow in their train," Bryant mused at the end of his catalog of queries.[3]

What was it that enabled—and compelled—an influential editor to ask whether a city could be planned, just then and there, in Manhattan in 1868? That is the question around which I came to construct the story of *Empire City*. Two fundamental facts are essential to the answers that I have offered. First of all, the Manhattan landscape underwent dynamic, systematic change in the third quarter of the century. In 1883, the year the Brooklyn Bridge opened, New York was not merely a bigger city than it had been at midcentury, but a fundamentally different one. It had changed from a bustling but compact port to an expansive, internally segregated metropolitan area: a landscape whose specialty districts, monumental architecture, and avant-garde infrastructures mobilized capital, goods, and people with unprecedented efficacy. Along with great achievements, this transformation had produced a nexus of spatial and social frictions: sclerotic congestion, chaotic land use, dilapidated structures, and

a new-built landscape of tenements and workshops alien to the values and oversight of the urban bourgeoisie. Both the dynamism and the disorder of nineteenth-century capitalism were inscribed on the built environment of Manhattan and the city-building process that recast it.

Second, these changes spurred a novel response from New York city builders. Starting in the late 1850s, reform intellectuals, real-estate developers, and other urbanists pursued an innovative effort to regulate New York's environmental ills, redesign its landscape, and guide its growth. Their initiative took different forms in various parts of the cityscape: engineering triumphs like the Brooklyn Bridge, pioneering health and housing codes, the first campaign to systematically redevelop the Manhattan waterfront. Yet the most far-reaching effort involved the comprehensive planning of the metropolitan periphery. In upper Manhattan, outer Brooklyn, and other surrounding areas, genteel reformers and their allies sought to lay out a unified landscape of scenic parks, promenades, civic institutions, and planned residential districts: a civilizing otherworld that was designed to counter the commercial, class, and moral discontents of the urban center.

These interventions were not all of a piece. Yet they were nurtured by a common ideological and political milieu that linked changes in the real-estate economy, experiments in local state building, and new ideals of environmental uplift. The city builders most responsible for creating that milieu were precisely the groups whose connections we saw in the story of the *Evening Post* editorial: reform professionals like Prospect Park designers Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux; civic-minded capitalists like the Brooklyn park commissioners to whom they reported; and property developers who would have reread Bryant's column in the pages of the *Real Estate Record*. This constellation of business leaders, growth boosters, and cultural arbiters articulated a complex vision of New York's place in national space and civilizational history; they elaborated a design program that specified what such an "Empire City" should look like; and they pursued the power to create that landscape on the ground. I call this nexus of cultural values, design ideals, and political action "bourgeois urbanism."

Empire City tries to solve the riddle of William Cullen Bryant's question by situating it in relation to these two stories of spatial and social change. On one hand, the book traces New York's growth and reconstruction in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, analyzing the market forces, institutions, and cultural values that organized city building in the new metropolis. On the other hand, it traces the rise of bourgeois urbanism, analyzing the ideological assumptions and political efforts with which Manhattan's would-be planners responded to the contradictory results of the city-building process.

In telling these stories, *Empire City* benefits from a wealth of existing research into the history of urban geography and planning. At the same time, it diverges from some long-standing paradigms in that research. Let me lay out the book's argument and sketch where it seeks to intervene in two sets of scholarly conversations: conversations about the history of city building and of urban planning in Victorian America.

City Building

For most of the nineteenth century, "New York" meant Manhattan Island (a usage to which *Empire City* conforms). Not until 1874, when the municipal government annexed portions of southern Westchester, did the city limits extend beyond Manhattan; not until 1898 was the five-borough "Greater New York" consolidated. Yet, as I shall argue, "lesser New York" was the scene of dramatic spatial change, change that laid the groundwork for metropolitan consolidation. Especially between the late 1840s and the panic of 1873, New York underwent a development boom that extended the urban fabric over most of Manhattan Island and recast the city's internal geography. "The march of improvement," as contemporaries called it, was fueled by a flood of capital into New York's property markets; it was organized by new real-estate institutions and infrastructures that knit Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the environs into an expansive metropolitan area. The midcentury boom reshaped both the island city and the larger region into a complex landscape differentiated according to economic function, social class, architectural type, and physical density.

In tracing New York's growth from a walking city to a segregated metropolis, *Empire City* builds on a valuable tradition of morphological analysis in American urban studies. Indeed the very category "walking city" comes from one of the masters of that tradition, Sam Bass Warner. Led by historians like Warner and geographers like David Ward, scholars in the 1970s and 1980s elaborated a sophisticated model of urban spatial change in American history. Their work reflected many of the assumptions of modernization theory, then so influential in U.S. social science; it tended to model city building in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America as a microcosm of modernization itself.[4] The model was organized largely around two sets of claims.

First of all, many researchers asserted, U.S. cities went through a systematic, phased process of spatial differentiation and metropolitan integration. The process was activated by the pressures of demographic growth and industrial complexity; and it seemed to mirror a larger imperative toward functional specialization and mass integration thought to characterize the social reorganization of turn-of-the-century America as a whole.[5] Second, it was widely argued, the key mechanism for this reshaping of urban space was changing technology, especially improvements in transportation and other infrastructures. Influential studies like Warner's *Streetcar Suburbs*, Melvin Holli's *Reform in Detroit*, and Kenneth T. Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier* underscored the centrality of infrastructural change to land development and municipal politics; surveys of the "new urban history" tended to periodize the evolution of U.S. cities according to the transportation systems dominant in each phase of their growth.[6]

Together these claims offered a powerful model of urban spatial change. It attributed the dramatic reconfiguration of American cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the functional requirements of complexity and growth and the enabling effects of technological progress. Like other models grounded in a master

narrative of modernization, such an analysis was vulnerable to criticism for being unilineal, automatic, and negligent of political conflict and contingency. Yet it stimulated a wealth of nuanced research into the evolution of such cities as Boston, Philadelphia, and Milwaukee, and it has proven very helpful in this analysis of New York.[7] As I describe in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, Manhattan and its environs *did* undergo a process of spatial and functional differentiation; indeed Victorian observers saw the bifurcation of the metropolis into a site-intensive, commercial "downtown" and an expansive, residential "uptown" as the defining mark of the midcentury boom. Moreover the boom culminated in a set of infrastructures—streetcar networks, the elevated railway system, and (most famously) the Brooklyn Bridge—whose construction accelerated New York's metropolitan integration.

Yet *Empire City* diverges from the classic modernization model in several ways. The most obvious is chronological: I situate New York's transformation in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, some thirty years earlier than the usual periodization of morphological change. In part this reflects the vanguard pace of New York's development compared with other cities in Victorian America; but it also marks my different sense of the *causes* of that development. Precisely because the classic model laid such stress on technological progress, it tended to privilege the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the era of electric traction, structural-steel construction, and automobility—as the revolutionary epoch of American city building. By contrast, *Empire City* treats the development of the metropolitan real-estate economy as the key engine of spatial change. More than infrastructural determinism, I argue, it was the maturation of a dynamic, centralized market in space that drove the transformation of New York—a development that took place mainly in the middle decades of the nineteenth century.

Thus, much of the first half of *Empire City* is concerned with tracing the genesis and structure of New York's real-estate economy. As I argue, the rule of real estate may be said to begin with the famous street plan of 1811, which platted the unbuilt city as a uniform grid of blocks and lots. Yet the grid was only a groundwork. In the 1850s and 1860s, it was activated by a set of institutions and practices—a central real-estate salesroom, a weekly trade journal, regular auction and partition sales, institutional sources of mortgage credit—that made land and location into fungible, standardized, price-sensitive commodities in a relatively unified field of exchange. The commodification of space enabled (and compelled) propertied New Yorkers to treat the cityscape as a means of financial accumulation. They responded by pouring capital into it, fashioning a city that sorted land use and buildings according to the ability to pay for space. Within this market regime, new infrastructures like horse cars and rapid transit had important *proximate* effects on urban growth and specialization. Yet the introduction of public improvements was itself paced less by technological progress than by the dynamics of capital formation and land speculation.

In shifting my account of New York city building from technical modernization to the rule of real estate, I have found two bodies of research especially helpful. First I profited from a wide range of work on urban land markets, property relations, and

the political aims of developers. Historians Michael Doucet, Elizabeth Blackmar, and Robin Einhorn, for instance, have explored the geographic and economic atomism of property markets in early-nineteenth-century cities and the patterns of political localism that often ensued.[8] By contrast, studies of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century community developers stress the centralized planning aims of suburban "master builders."[9] *Empire City* draws on many questions posed by this scholarship, but it offers somewhat different answers. In contrast to accounts of earlier American cities, it portrays a New York whose real-estate economy has become spatially integrated and economically tied to other American capital markets (markets that were going through their own process of centralization on Wall Street). At the same time, unlike studies of later community planners, I describe a city where property ownership and city building remained piecemeal and dispersed. New York's metamorphosis, in sum, was fueled by a paradoxical mix of centralism and atomism characteristic of the midcentury era in which it took place. The cityscape that resulted from this volatile alchemy was a complex amalgam of rationality, dynamism, and disorder.

A second research literature helped me explore the economic logic and social effects of these changes. This was a tradition of spatial analysis, running from French historian Henri Lefebvre to contemporary geographers like Edward Soja and David Harvey, that has brought the resources of Marxist theory to bear on the study of urban environments.[10] Three key themes from this scholarship inform my account of New York. First of all, it argues that the urban landscape—indeed any landscape—needs to be understood not only as a *setting* for social and power relations but also as the *product* of those relations and a mediating *cause* in reshaping them. In Victorian New York, the "sociospatial dialectic," as Soja terms it, took the form of a complex, intimate interplay between local urban development and larger currents of capitalist growth. David Harvey's work on land markets and finance capital proved especially useful in analyzing this dynamic. Harvey helped me see the links between New York's physical transformation and its rise as a national finance center. Wall Street channeled vast resources into the midcentury boom, making city land into a more liquid asset and city land use more responsive to market cues. Conversely, the resulting landscape fostered the process of capitalist growth, circulating money, goods, information, and people at an unprecedented velocity and volume.[11]

The concept of a "sociospatial dialectic" underlies a second key theme of *Empire City*: the interplay between spatial change and *class formation*, especially bourgeois class formation, in Victorian New York. Given the mix of dynamism and market fragmentation that characterized city building in the midcentury boom, propertied New Yorkers were forced to come together in new ways to manage the juggernaut of change. Trade journals like the *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide*, developers' coalitions like the West Side Association, reform groups like the Citizens' Association—such institutions cut across social networks, business sectors, and even political rivalries to cement city- and classwide collaborations. In so doing they fostered a sense of commonalty among a metropolitan bourgeoisie that drew its members from disparate parts of the nation. Class affiliation was thus both a precondition for the

"march of improvement" and a consequence of the boulevards, parks, and neighborhoods that it laid out.

Finally, the Marxist tradition of urban studies helped me make sense of perhaps the most fundamental datum of New York's midcentury boom: its massively contradictory effects. If there was one truism that Victorian observers stressed again and again, it was that the new metropolis was divided against itself. New York was a vast melodrama of "sunshine and shadow," as popular journalists put it, counterposing wealth and destitution, virtue and vice. These contrasts were inscribed in the built environment itself, making the Manhattan grid a mosaic of grandeur, congestion, and decay. The human costs of living in such a city were moral and social as well as environmental and economic. Space was at once fractured and boundariless in Victorian New York, and the city streets became a theater of class distance, class friction, and persistent civil violence during the mid-nineteenth century.

As I argue in Chapter 5, the modernization model of city building tended to attribute such ills to a lag model of change: rookeries, riots, and ramshackle piers were seen as the residua of a process of rationalization that had not yet fully run its course. In contrast, *Empire City* treats the frictions of Victorian Manhattan as part of an *emergent* pattern of uneven development. That pattern was grounded, I argue, in the peculiar qualities of urban land value as a commodity, its paradoxical melding of monopolistic power and fragile interdependence. New York's development boom reinforced both the inertia and the volatility of the market in space, generating a city-building process that careened between obsessive calculation and speculative excess. The result was a "heteroscape" in which traffic was jammed alongside abandoned docks, palatial rail depots were surrounded by sweatshop lofts, and elegant townhouses went up a stone's throw from tenement speculations. The rule of real estate was a catalyst of contradiction.[12]

Urbanism

In response to these changes, as I have said, New York's city builders, reformers, real-estate promoters, and businessmen began to ask, "Can a city be planned?" during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. The second half of *Empire City* offers an account of the assumptions, proposals, and political actions with which these urbanists answered Bryant's question. Chapter 5 unpacks the cultural discourses and urbanistic ideals that informed their view of what a rising capitalist metropolis like New York should look like. Chapter 6 analyzes which social constituencies took up the new urbanism, and it maps the political affiliations, models of state power, and ideologies of class authority that organized their (conflicting) efforts to guide the city-building process. Chapter 7 offers an interpretation of the initiatives that grew out of these efforts. It touches on efforts to regulate and coordinate land use, property development, and public works in the existing, downtown cityscape. Yet it argues that the centerpiece of the new urbanism was the campaign to lay out and oversee an "up-

town utopia" of parks, boulevards, planned suburbs, and tutelary institutions on the metropolitan periphery.

As with the analysis of city building in the first half of *Empire City*, my reading of bourgeois urbanism both draws on and departs from established research in the history of American city planning. Let me clarify my dialogue with this rich body of work. Until the last decade, the dominant narrative of planning history fit squarely within what I have called the modernization paradigm in U.S. scholarship. As codified in Mel Scott's magisterial *American City Planning* (1969), an institutional history commissioned by the American Institute of Planners, and disseminated in the "new urban history" literature of the 1970s, that narrative was organized around three fundamental claims. It privileged the early twentieth century as the inaugural moment of city planning in the United States. It foregrounded the professional consolidation of physical master planning as the key achievement of that era, focusing on the maturation of Progressive environmental reform into an urban profession of design experts, civic managers, comprehensive planners, and applied social scientists. Finally it tended to treat the outcomes of twentieth-century planning reform—zoning codes, housing regulations, City Beautiful designs, and master plans—as fundamentally *technical* interventions against unregulated growth.[13]

This is not to say that planning scholarship was inattentive to the intellectual development of planning thought and design aesthetics; but it generally cast that evolution as a self-evidently rational response to the self-evidently disorderly side effects of urban modernization. The dominant narrative, in short, paralleled the historiography of city building not only in its periodization of change but also in its focus on the inexorable dynamics of growth and functional complexity. Planning emerged in Progressive-era America, this research argued, to manage the "organizational revolution" in urban space; and planning was required because nineteenth-century political institutions, property regimes, and infrastructural systems had proven plainly inadequate to the juggernaut of change. Within such a paradigm, it was less essential to explore the framing values or tacit ideological assumptions that planning advocates brought to their encounters with the cityscape. Planning did not need to have a cultural history.

New research on American planning and design has challenged these claims over the past ten to fifteen years. First of all, historians of Victorian America have reframed the periodization of the field, showing that by the middle decades of the nineteenth century, intellectuals, engineers, sanitarians, and design practitioners shared William Cullen Bryant's interest in the systematic shaping of urban space and urban growth. Moreover, scholars have traced this new planning impulse not merely to the proto-professional activities of environmental reformers but also to a wide array of social actors. David Hammack, for instance, has pointed to the role of urban business elites in nineteenth-century planning experiments; Jon Peterson and Clay McShane lay similar stress on civil engineers and other infrastructural innovators. Finally new research has made clear what is evident in Bryant's editorial: that the turn to planning was not simply a technical response to environmental disorder, but a self-consciously

cultural project of social and moral improvement. Several scholars have underscored the centrality of "moral environmentalism" to Victorian urbanism, the notion that the natural and built environments exercised a profound tutelary influence on domestic and public life. Planning history on this view was inseparable from the history of American culture: not only because the new urbanists brought their moral values to the city-building process but also because they conceived city building as a culture-building project, an effort to embed virtue, taste, and civility in urban space.[14]

These revisionary claims—earlier periodization, less focus on the genesis of professional institutions, more attention to cultural context and aims—came together in the most influential strand of the new planning historiography: studies of Victorian landscape design, most notably the park and urban designs of Frederick Law Olmsted. As I elaborate in Chapter 1, recent scholarship has generated a veritable Olmsted cottage industry, marked by several biographies, nuanced research into Olmsted's landscape, reform, and intellectual work, and the publication of his personal papers. (Attention to Olmsted's collaborators, most of all his partner Calvert Vaux, has only just begun to catch up.) The result has been a narrative that situates the rise of American city planning in the settings and themes of Olmstedian design. David Schuyler's *New Urban Landscape*, for instance, incisively traces the extension of Olmsted's park work into a full-blown urban design program, one that sought to overcome the distempers of urban-industrial society by projecting the moral and functional distinctions of a well-ordered community into the spatial divisions of the planned metropolis. Schuyler argues that such a conception of the good city as a "house with many rooms," in Olmsted's phrase, constituted the first grand theory of the American planning tradition.[15]

Empire City owes much to this historiography. My periodization of bourgeois urbanism in New York echoes that of the new planning scholarship. Indeed New York was the setting for most of the experiments described in that scholarship; the country's first public-health board, tenement code, rapid transit system, and scenic park were all created in Manhattan in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Moreover, *Empire City* shares the view that these environmental and political initiatives need to be seen as *cultural* interventions, not simply functional responses to the complexities of urban growth: as my subtitle suggests, the "making" of the New York cityscape was inseparable from the "meaning" with which Victorian city builders invested it. It is for this reason that the book begins its account of the new urbanism (in Chapter 5) with a reading of what New Yorkers imagined an "empire city" should look like. More generally, it is why I have borrowed the French usage *urbanism* to describe their efforts to direct the growth of the metropolis. Unlike the more technical "planning," "urbanism" seems to me to convey the cultural stakes of urban reconstruction, denoting both a program of physical interventions and the ideological and aesthetic discourses that inform them.

Finally *Empire City* joins with other recent research in stressing the centrality of Victorian park and landscape design, notably the work of Frederick Law Olmsted. A history of New York could not do otherwise: Olmsted's career began and flourished

there in the midcentury boom, during which he collaborated on Central, Prospect, Morningside, and Riverside parks and engaged in pioneering efforts at parkway design, suburban development, and metropolitan land-use planning. I began this project many years ago out of curiosity about Olmsted's cultural politics. Although I have come to believe (with other scholars) that we need to decenter his contributions to Victorian urbanism in order to understand their full complexity, *Empire City* opens with a consideration of Olmsted's legacy and includes an extended reading of his politics and landscape design. As will be clear from my argument and my footnotes, that reading draws appreciatively on the insights of the scholarly Olmsted boom.

Nonetheless *Empire City* offers its own distinctive account of the values, social forces, and institutions that gave rise to bourgeois urbanism in New York. I would stress the significance of three themes vis-à-vis the historiography of American urban planning and design. The first concerns the nature of the cultural ideals that underlay the new urbanism; the second concerns the centrality of social class to its genesis and aims; and the third concerns its effect on American state building and politics. Let me sketch each of these themes in turn.

Along with other recent scholarship, *Empire City* stresses the importance of moral environmentalism to Victorian design. It argues that New York city builders (like many reformers, designers, and tastemakers) viewed the natural and built environment as an index and instrument of moral progress in American society. Yet their efforts entailed more than just a generic faith in the uplifting influence of planning and design. New York's urbanists infused moral environmentalism with a complex vision of what a great metropolis should look like, a vision that sought to link capitalist growth, civilizational order, and the city's rising power. Drawing on notions that historians have come to label booster discourse, bourgeois New Yorkers believed their city destined for greatness—or, to use the idiom of nineteenth-century boosters, for "empire." The midcentury boom reflected Manhattan's imperial power over space and history, they argued, and the cityscape should embody that imperium, confirming and enhancing New York's national dominion. Thus (more than scholars of Victorian design have tended to stress), the new urbanism melded genteel environmental reform with a booster erotics of growth. It envisioned a cityscape that could embody both commerce and civilization, market energy and moral uplift.

When New Yorkers looked at the actual city through these ideological bifocals, what they saw was a mixed record. The uneven effects of growth seemed simultaneously to affirm and to mock their ambitions. They turned to planning and design to project their divided loyalties across a complex metropolitan area. New York's city builders used opulent architectural style to celebrate commercial dynamism; park design to elevate public sociability; residential land-use planning to secure orderly home life; and public improvements to knit these spaces and values within a common cityscape. At the same time, they believed that such innovations could overcome the sociospatial disorders of the midcentury boom. Tenement codes would eradicate nests of disease and vice; planned suburbs would provide class-specific enclaves of domestic virtue; public parks would educate the masses from riotousness to

refinement. Victorian city builders, in short, treated the cityscape as an ideological text, one that registered both their aspiration to oversee capitalism and civilization and the actualities that threatened it. They embraced the new urbanism as a way to simultaneously ratify and nullify the meaning of New York's growth.

These imperial ambitions grew out of a specific class milieu, the social world of the metropolitan bourgeoisie. *Empire City* argues that the new urbanism was a class-defined effort—a *bourgeois* urbanism—in several linked senses. First, its program of environmental regulation, public works, coordinated property development, and civilizing landscape design was shaped by the economic pursuits, social networks, and civic norms of propertied and refined New Yorkers. I do not mean by this *simply* that the new urbanism was an elite project—undeniably true—nor that all elite New Yorkers shared the same interests or values in pursuing it. Indeed, I do not believe that class identity can ever be reduced to a single socioeconomic position or a set of interests or values self-evidently grounded in that position. Yet, in a systematically unequal society like that of the nineteenth-century United States, socioeconomic hierarchies defined relatively distinct worlds within which people construed their interests and argued over their values.

Empire City devotes much effort to anatomizing the class world of New York's urbanists. It specifies three elites that sought most programmatically to guide the city's growth—genteel intellectuals and reformers, civic-minded business leaders, and real-estate developers and boosters—and it maps the political, associational, and moral commitments that bound and divided them. The book argues that the primary public to whom these groups addressed their efforts was the larger metropolitan gentry, "the moral and fortunate classes," as charity reformer Charles Loring Brace put it, who were assumed to have the highest stake in New York's commercial power and civic order.[16] Moreover I emphasize that the "content" of the new urbanism reflected class-based attitudes toward property, public civility, and domestic virtue.

At the same time, *Empire City* argues that the new urbanism helped to *shape* the class bonds of bourgeois New Yorkers, even as it was grounded in them. Spatial change and class formation were interactive processes. Through land development, civic associations, and leadership on public agencies, propertied and powerful New Yorkers did much to fashion themselves into an elite collectivity. The new landscape fostered this process of social consolidation, providing commercial, domestic, and public settings where bourgeois New Yorkers recognized one another as members of the city's "wealth and intelligence." *Empire City* thus treats the category of class as simultaneously material and cultural, constructed through patterns of sociability, moral convictions, symbolic practices, and political projects as much as through the tectonics of economic power. Urban space was at once a product of, and a medium for, this play of forces and discourses. In fashioning parks, rapid transit, and tenement codes, bourgeois New Yorkers remade themselves as well.[17]

Finally, *Empire City* stresses the hegemonic ambitions of New York's urbanists: it argues that they sought programmatically to embed their class authority in the fabric of the built environment. Such a linkage between spatial change and social steward-

ship would doubtless have characterized elite city building no matter what New York's stature; but the fact of the city's national dominance raised the stakes even further. The metropolitan bourgeoisie that was gathering itself in Manhattan was a self-consciously *national* class, drawn from every region of the country, drawn together by its control of national finance, trade, and commercial culture, defined by its hunger for national preeminence. Creating a sublime, civilizing metropolis seemed to elite New Yorkers proof of that preeminence, confirmation not only of the city's imperium but also of their own.[18]

The new urbanism thus invested the Manhattan landscape with enormous cultural and class ambitions. As a result, spatial change carried enormous *political* stakes as well—the third and final theme in my account of planning and design in Victorian New York. Innovative city building required innovative state building, and *Empire City* maps the political alliances, governmental institutions, and ideals of state power by which New Yorkers sought to construct a political regime capable of building an imperial metropolis. The book argues that bourgeois urbanism spurred a significant enlargement of public authority. Indeed, the two most innovative forms of state power in nineteenth-century America—the centralized party machine and the independent, appointive commission—were created in New York between the late 1850s and the early 1870s, in large part to oversee the infrastructure investments, landscape projects, and sanitary regulations of the midcentury boom. Park boards, health codes, and public-works departments thus represented pioneering experiments in the laboratory of American state formation.[19]

These new institutions of governance recast the terrain of political conflict in New York. They organized the city-building process as a struggle between two rival blocs, each with its own version of the imperial design ideal, its own vision of the purposes of state power, its own strategies for ensuring class order. On one side, a largely Democratic coalition of politicians and property speculators sought to cement cross-class electoral majorities around a booster program of patronage, public works, and an aesthetic of growth and grandeur. On the other hand, a largely Republican cadre of reformers and civic-minded capitalists turned to environmental reform and landscape design to civilize metropolitan life and induct the urban masses into its habits and virtues. For the Tammany machine, urbanism offered an arena of class oversight through clientelistic coalitions and market exchange. For genteel environmentalists, urbanism offered oversight by means of moral tutelage and uplifting discipline.

And yet, *Empire City* finally argues, we should not overdraw this division between bosses and reformers, politicos and "best men," that has structured the story of so much nineteenth-century urban historiography. For all their conflicts, New York's urbanists shared a common sense about the links between politics, landscape, and city building. Both camps agreed that the expansion of state power was an indispensable means of realizing New York's imperial destiny in space. Both agreed that the new urbanism was a way to protect that destiny from the corrosive threats of class and commercial disorder. And both agreed that the larger project of urban design was to secure both popular democracy and bourgeois "civilization" from—and for—

the explosive energies of capitalist growth. That common sense defined the common ground on which they pursued some very real conflicts and tactical skirmishing. It made for a city-building process in which unexpected agreements and alliances reached across the political fault lines.

City and Nation

I have given an overview of *Empire City* by situating its argument in relation to the historiography of spatial change and city planning in nineteenth-century America. There is one other important way in which the book diverges from the main tendencies of U.S. urban-historical research. It emphasizes the specifically *national* causes and consequences of city building in Victorian New York. The city's role as the headquarters of American capitalism and public culture, I argue, meant that its development was exceptional in both senses of the word. As a result, this book is not intended to be the sort of exemplary case study that has long been a strength of U.S. urban historiography. Rather it seeks to explain local city building and planning reform by reference to larger currents of economic and cultural change, class formation, and nation building—currents that made the reshaping of New York at once anomalous and uniquely significant. Chapter 1 frames this aspect of my argument with an overview of the interplay between national and metropolitan development; and subsequent chapters elaborate the significance of that interplay for such themes as the growth of the Manhattan real-estate economy, the process of local class formation, and the cultural stakes with which metropolitan space was invested. Let me briefly sketch my analysis here.

First of all, I argue, we cannot understand the transformation of Victorian New York without taking account of the forces that national power focused on the cityscape. Manhattan's economic dominance imposed complex functional demands on the urban environment, even as it flooded the local real-estate economy with investment capital. *Empire City* maps the circuits that channeled such resources into city building and the rise of a market regime capable of deploying them. At the same time, as I noted previously, it traces a concomitant process of class formation. New York drew capitalists, professionals, and intellectuals from across the United States, providing spaces, customs, and institutions by which they made themselves the "collective subject" of the city-building process and welded to it their ambitions for national stewardship. These ambitions were reinforced by New York's centrality to American electoral politics and genteel reform. Urbanists of all stripes were willing to lavish enormous public debt on public improvements, and the nation's leading architects, civil engineers, and public administrators—many recently settled in the metropolitan area—proved eager to make New York a laboratory of design innovation.

New York's preeminence shaped not only the making of the cityscape, but its meaning as well. As the emerging center of American publishing, taste-making, and commercial culture, the metropolis was scrutinized obsessively. Sketch writers, illus-

trators, editorialists, and reformers expounded the significance of the cityscape for a national public. Its grandeurs—Brooklyn Bridge, Grand Central Depot, Central Park—were read as tokens of American sublimity and civility; its disorders—traffic jams, tenements, tumbledown docks—as signs of corruption. This sense of the national stakes of local growth shaped debates over city building and environmental reform. Urbanists like Frederick Law Olmsted and the booster William Martin assumed that the eyes of the country were trained on their experiments in park design, public works, and planned growth, and that these efforts represented transformative experiments in democracy and civilization. Indeed, they linked the reconstruction of New York with other projects of nation building and cultural uplift: the reform of American politics, the consolidation of a national market, the settlement of the North American West, and Southern Reconstruction.

When William Cullen Bryant asked, "CAN A CITY BE PLANNED?" then, he was asking a loaded question. New York's urbanists loaded it with some of the most consequential issues in Victorian America: the reforming of culture, the stabilizing of class relations, the uniting of the nation, the oversight of a volatile economy, and of course the development of a booming, complex metropolis. As we shall see, their efforts produced many important changes in Manhattan and its environs. And yet, on its own ambitious terms, bourgeois urbanism proved a failure. Commercial palaces, rail depots, monumental bridges, and scenic parks were created; health codes and park commissions were founded; but the larger vision of bourgeois urbanism, the creation of an Empire City of civic order, capitalist dynamism, and civilized public and domestic life, was left unfulfilled. Behind that failure lay a larger crisis of authority and ambition for the bourgeoisie of New York and the nation. I discuss the contours and causes of that failure in Chapter 8.

CHAPTER 1

Metropolis and Nation

Here, starting from a definite origin in persons and principles, at the threshold of a broad continent, in bright ages, with a free development, with all the strength we require, we are working out our history in the future. The present supremacy of New York involves great intellectual and moral responsibility. In ancient times the provinces of the Roman empire erected temples and statues in honor of Rome. . . . New York must so fulfill her part as to merit the like recognition from a united country.

—William Martin, *The Growth of New York* (1865)

Saint Olmsted and Frederick the Great

Frederick Law Olmsted never lacked for audacity. In 1858, a year after his appointment as Superintendent of New York's new Central Park, six months after winning (with his collaborator, Calvert Vaux) the competition for its design, he lobbied his journalist friends for favorable notice in the press. "It is of great importance as the first real park made in this country," he wrote Parke Godwin, a leading Republican editor, imploring him to review the plan, "a democratic development of the highest significance & on the success of which, in my opinion, much of the progress of art & esthetic culture in this country is dependent." At a time when the park site was still largely rock, marsh, and shanty villages, this was an amazingly presumptuous claim—even more so coming from a novice engaged on his first landscape commission (Figure 1.1). Yet Olmsted's peers seconded his views, providing Central Park with the imprimatur on which he believed its success depended. Calvert Vaux, his collaborator on the "Greensward Plan" for the park, asserted its "vital importance to the progress of the Republic." The influential minister and reformer Henry W. Bellows called it "the first grand proof" that democracy and civility were commensurable with each other in America. "The actual existence of the Central Park," Bellows enthused in the *Atlantic Monthly*, offered "the best answer yet given to the doubts and

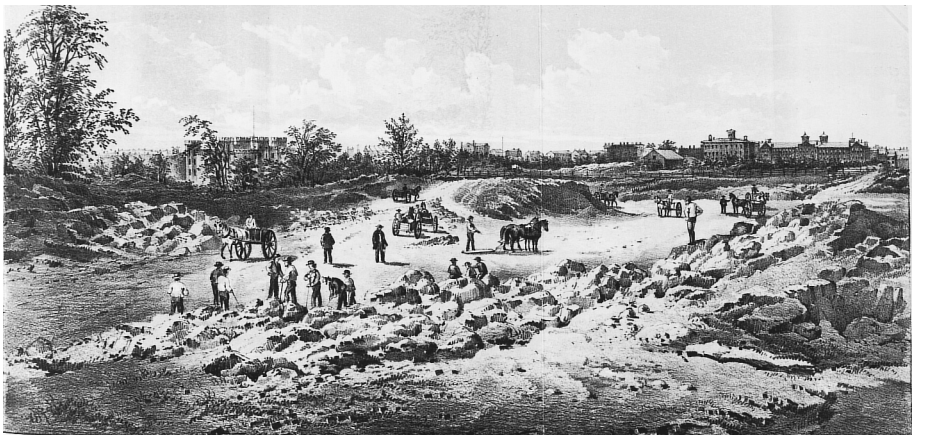

FIGURE 1.1 Rock clearing and grading along the Promenade in Central Park: this early lithograph illustrates the sheer amount of labor required to turn pastoral ideals into landscape. (*Valentine's Manual of the Corporation of the City of New York,* 1859; University Library, University of Michigan)

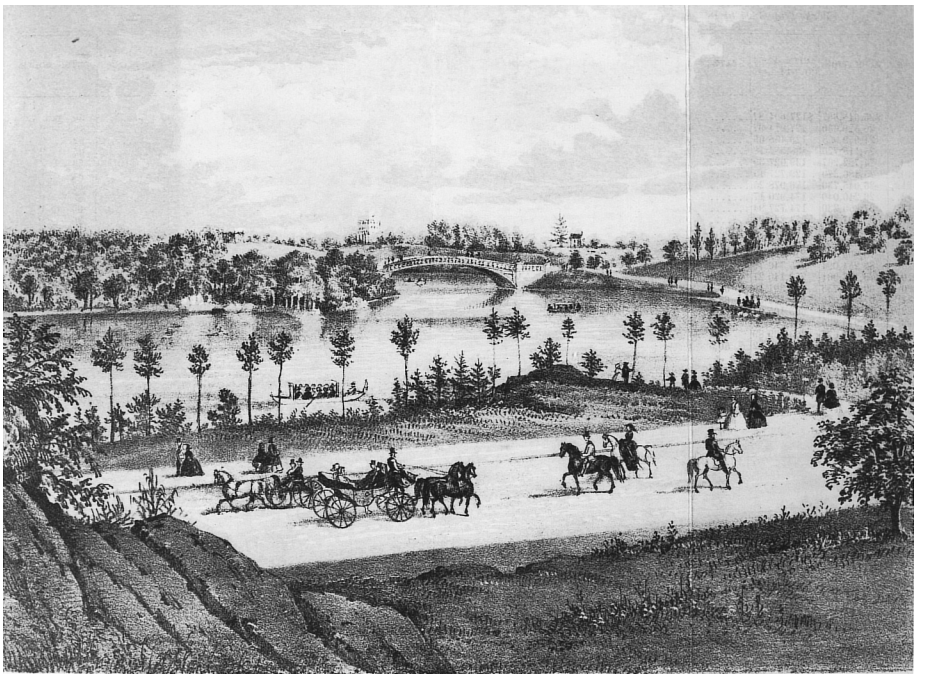

FIGURE 1.2 The Carriage Drive in Central Park, rounding the west side of the lake, is a portrait of the ideal of orderly, rustic leisure that defined the park design. (*Valentine's Manual of the Corporation of the City of New York,* 1861; University Library, University of Michigan)

fears which have frowned on the theory of self-government. . . . It is a royal work, undertaken . . . by the Democracy, . . . developing . . . new and almost incredible tastes, aptitudes, capacities, and powers in the people themselves."[1]

A century later, such praise may seem incontestable. In fact the creation of the park has become something of a civic myth of origins for New Yorkers, a heroic narrative of effective benevolence. Olmsted in particular has achieved near-apotheosis as a pioneer of the movement to humanize life in great cities. "During the great days of planning and building New York City—the Frederick Law Olmsted era in the 19th century, the Robert Moses era of the mid-20th—the park system was planned, built and maintained as an indispensable aspect of a livable city," a 1984 Op-Ed piece from the New York *Times* argued, pressing for reorganization of the Parks Department. Such invocations of the heroic past provide a powerful sanction for politics in the present. The Central Park Conservancy, for instance, has won stunning improvements in the park's funding, safety, and ecological stability in recent years through a self-conscious return to "Olmstedian" canons of planning, regulation, and use. The core of its program has been "the acceptance of the Park as its original creators saw it"—to quote the conservancy's master plan—"a scenic retreat, a peaceful space that would act as an antidote to urban stress." Park officials have pursued many of the policies first formulated by Superintendent Olmsted: protecting naturalistic effects, dispersing use, curbing social and ecological disruptions. Pastimes like team athletics and rock concerts have been curtailed, and a more pastoral treatment of the park grounds has been enhanced—all in the name of restoring the vision of "Saint Olmsted," as park administrator Elizabeth Barlow Rogers has called him.[2]

The pristine, restorative value of Central Park as originally laid out; the heroism and vision of its creators, most of all Olmsted; the triumph of the park as a humanizing "antidote" to the ills of city life—here are the elements of a civic hagiography. It has shaped not only current-day park policy but also the ways in which Central Park, Olmsted, and nineteenth-century New York are cast in public memory. When I have described this book to nonspecialists—as a history of the making and meaning of the Victorian cityscape—that memory is what frames their response. *So you are writing about New York?* they usually ask. *Will you discuss Central Park?* To begin a history of nineteenth-century spatial change and city design in Manhattan with the grandest achievement of Victorian urbanism seems natural—as natural as the parkscape itself.

Yet Central Park was not a natural development, and neither is the story of "Saint Olmsted." As historians Elizabeth Blackmar and Roy Rosenzweig have shown, the park was a massively made thing, produced out of the barrens of mid-Manhattan with dynamite, drainage machinery, tons of imported topsoil, nursery-bred plantations, and the efforts of several thousand laborers during the 1850s and 1860s.[3] Similarly the canonization of Olmsted was the result of a complex history of intellectual and political labor, mainly dating to the past thirty years. To be sure, since the founding of the park, journalists, intellectuals, and political activists have cast Olmsted as its presiding genius and taken his program of a disciplined space of rustic retreat to be its definitive ideal (Figure 1.2). Yet, far from seeming incontestable, Olmsted's role

was challenged from the start: by administrative rivals like commissioner Andrew Haswell Green, urbanists with less pastoral conceptions of the park, and members of the public who sought more open use of it.[4]

Olmsted's friend and codesigner, Calvert Vaux, offered perhaps the most poignant and pointed of these challenges. Vaux resisted Olmsted's obsession with the hierarchical control of park construction and use, and he resented his own subordinate status in the public mind. In a series of bitter letters, he castigated Olmsted's "conversion of this many sided, fluent, thoroughly American high art work into a machine —over which as Frederick the Great, Prince of the Park Police you should preside, and with regal liberality dispense certificates of docility to the artists engaged in the work. All this side of the affair is nauseating and odious."[5] As I will discuss in Chapter 6, Vaux's painful words encoded fundamental political conflicts over the mission and shape of the new park—conflicts concerning the very meaning of freedom and discipline in a democratic public culture. These struggles ebbed and flowed throughout the first century of Central Park's existence. The cult of Olmsted received renewed impetus during the 1920s and 1930s, when regionalist, conservationist, and design intellectuals like Lewis Mumford and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., enlisted him as a forebear for their own endeavors. Yet the "idolatry of Olmsted," as one disgruntled park goer called it, was more honored in the breach when it came to actual policy. The early twentieth century saw many recreational and consumer additions to the parkscape: ball fields, playgrounds, the skating rink, the elegant Casino restaurant, Robert Moses's zoo. It was against these "encroachments" that preservationists celebrated Olmsted's status as a founding father and sought to defend his scenic and disciplinary ideals.[6]

Only in the past two decades has "Saint Olmsted" held unchallenged sway over the critics of "Frederick the Great." In part his canonization was a response to ecological and social problems that beset Central Park in the 1950s and 1960s: problems of overuse, underfunding, crime, and vandalism, in a city fractured by ethnicity, class, and neighborhood. At a time when muggings and graffiti in the park had come to emblematize the national "urban crisis," scholars, archivists, designers, and activists began to revisit Olmsted's writings, landscapes, social thought, and career. The result was an extraordinary outpouring of research materials, including several fine biographies, anthologies of Olmsted's reports and lectures, and museum exhibits on his design work. Scholars produced nuanced treatments of his landscape practices, contribution to Victorian social theory, and place in the evolution of nineteenth-century urban design. A multivolume edition of Olmsted's papers published records of his landscape, reform, journalistic, and commercial pursuits. It is not surprising that park advocates found in Olmsted's career a usable past for their own efforts to reverse Central Park's neglect.[7]

Like most narratives of restoration, then, the canonization of Olmsted and "his" park had more to do with the dreams and needs of the narrators than with the times to which they looked back. To say this is not to diminish the value of reclaiming Cen-

tral Park and its creators. The recent physical and fiscal renewal of the park represents an extraordinary civic achievement in its own right—one which does not require the warrant of a myth of origins. Similarly, the intellectual work of the "Olmsted boom" has been immensely important. It is no longer possible to narrate the development of environmental reform, landscape design, and city planning, in the United States and elsewhere, without giving Central Park and Olmsted (and increasingly Vaux) pride of place. Thus, one historian describes Olmsted as a "taproot" of the City Beautiful movement during the Progressive Era; another stresses his influence on the pioneering English planner Ebenezer Howard.[8] Certainly my own exploration of urbanism in Victorian New York has been vastly enriched by the scholarly reconstruction of the park and its most celebrated makers.

Why, then, begin this book by putting "Saint Olmsted" in his place? My point is not to debunk his achievements; rather it is precisely to put him *in* his place. As an icon in the hagiography of reform, a founder of the lineage of planners, "Saint Olmsted" does not have much to tell us about the world in which Frederick Law Olmsted and others made Central Park. The very brightness of his image tends to bleach out much of the complexity, contingency, and significance of urbanism in Victorian New York. It cannot help us understand what Olmsted meant, and what he did, in laying claim to the park as "a democratic development of the highest significance," a key to "the progress of art & esthetic culture in this country." Understanding such words means placing them in a different narrative, narrower in time and broader in context: a history of the New York cityscape as it was built, used, and interpreted in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. It is a history in which the shape and meaning of spaces like Central Park were still up for grabs: a history in which the utopian aspirations of "Saint Olmsted" were inseparable from the power politics of "Frederick the Great."

Within that frame, Central Park was not some generically benevolent "'public good." Its proponents were more self-consciously ideological than that, more aggressive and pointed in their aims. They conceived of landscape design and environmental reform not as local, ameliorative ends in themselves, but as elements in a regime of political, social, and moral governance. They linked the improvement of urban landscapes—of New York's landscape in particular—to the most ambitious projects of the Victorian bourgeoisie: the military and ideological consolidation of the nation, the extension of state power and class discipline over an unruly democratic polity, the creation of tutelary institutions to inculcate "civilized" values across a fractured social order. It is the echo of these ambitions that we hear in Olmsted's and Bellows's words.

Allegories of the National Cityscape

Let us start over, then, with these reformers' claims for Central Park. What can they tell us about the making and meaning of urban space in Victorian New York? "My

dear Godwin, I have been wishing for some time . . . to see you again," went Olmsted's 1858 appeal to Parke Godwin, "& now [comes] a scheme which I hope will have that result":

> There has not yet been a single . . . honest criticism of the plan of the park. . . . The Tribune has had some articles written by Mr. Dillon . . . based on . . . misrepresentation of the design. . . . It is of great importance as the first real park made in the country—a democratic development of the highest significance & on the success of which, in my opinion, much of the progress of art & esthetic culture in this country is dependent.
>
> . . . It is important to me that the public should have more interest, confidence & pride in it than they yet have. It is important especially that the misrepresentations . . . should be corrected. As a matter of business therefore, I would be glad to get you to write about it & to pay you fairly for the time & study . . . to obtain a complete . . . understanding of it.
>
> I think you could . . . write a general article . . . for the Atlantic, & a thorough review & criticism for the Tribune.

The first thing to note about the letter—and the reason I have quoted it at length—is the contentiousness that surrounds Olmsted's boast. This is a supremely practical document, part of a broad battle for control of Central Park in its early years. In the depression winter of 1857, Olmsted had been pressured by city politicians and working-class crowds to expand the patronage hiring of construction labor; the following spring, as the letter intimates, several Democratic park commissioners led by attorney Robert Dillon sought to amend the Greensward Plan to make it more economical and less rustic. Olmsted's letter was a response to these challenges. Parke Godwin was a trusted friend and a former partner of Olmsted's, a powerful voice in Republican Party circles and, as political editor of the New York *Evening Post*, a leading spokesmen for genteel values. No one was better placed to oppose these patronage and design incursions.[9]

Godwin never did write the "general article . . . for the Atlantic" for which he had been recruited, but two years later the Reverend Henry Bellows did. Bellows's paean to the park for justifying "the theory of self-government" displays the same mix of lofty assertion and political maneuvering. His essay was the result of a new round of publicity tactics. Olmsted was again under challenge in 1860, this time from Albany legislators investigating Democratic charges of cost overruns in the construction of the park. Once again he solicited aid from the journalistic gentry; in a letter to James Fields, the powerful Boston publisher and editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Olmsted proposed "Dr. Bellows" and several other possible authors for "an article on the park." Once more his choice was shrewd; the minister was an influential public intellectual who had worked with Olmsted on several publishing and reform projects. His essay for the *Atlantic* was everything Olmsted could have wanted. Not only did it rebut "the leading objections . . . to the plan," but it also boosted Olmsted personally as the sole American with the training and temperament to "appreciate and embody . . . a people's pleasure-ground."[10] Such praise was curious, given the ragged condition of the park in 1860. Yet Bellows's essay was not meant as a report of established fact. It was a performative utterance, designed to call into existence the spatial,