In January 2003, we attended the 117th annual meeting of the American Historical Association. Chicago was and remains a diverse and interesting place to grow up, and it was a treat to return for a few days. We stayed at a hotel on South Michigan Avenue. During that meeting, we attended a dinner at the Chicago Historical Society (now the Chicago History Museum). Rather than make the trip by subway, bus, or taxi, we decided to walk the 2.5 miles. Urban historians regularly encourage their students to take walking tours of cities. We made the correct decision. As a light snow fell around us, we crossed the Chicago River, skirted the affluent crowds window-shopping along the Magnificent Mile, and strolled through a swank residential area aptly named the Gold Coast. In the soft glow of the streetlights, we gazed at multimillion-dollar mansions and elegantly appointed brownstones on State Street north of the city’s dazzling skyline. By the time we reached the stately Chicago Historical Society at the southern edge of beautifully landscaped Lincoln Park, we were amply reminded of how decades of undivided attention to the financial health and attractive appearance of the urban core had succeeded in creating a wonderful setting for the Windy City’s most fortunate residents to reside and work.

As children and young adults in Chicago during the 1950s and 1960s, however, we resided in neighborhoods far removed from the central business district and the fabulous Gold Coast. Our families and our neighbors were mostly first- and second-generation descendants of immigrant people. Some grandparents spoke English with East European accents. We also re-
membered the less enthralling aspects of Chicago life in middling and working-class communities on the North Side. Apart from the occasional trip downtown for special occasions or shopping excursions in search of items unavailable at nearby shops, our families stayed close to home and made do in smallish houses and modest apartments. Our neighbors, as we recall, relied on the beneficence of Mayor Richard J. Daley and his foot soldiers in the potent Democratic machine to patch the streets and sidewalks, remove the snow, construct nearby parks with swings and sandboxes, and restore quiet when Saturday night revelers celebrated too loudly well into Sunday morning. Our parents, reliable Democratic party voters, admired Daley for making Chicago “the city that works.” All in all, local government played an important role in maintaining our neighborhoods and in creating attachments among neighbors and with far-off City Hall. During those years, however, we were not alert to the disparities between the city’s spending in our neighborhoods—Lakeview and Rogers Park—and the vast sums of money invested on downtown’s upkeep. Recalling our experiences in Chicago of many decades earlier, we understood that downtown’s exalted status had not only persisted but intensified across the postwar decades, right up to our visit in 2003.

As urban historians, we determined to study the politics that had brought downtown into such prominence, always to the detriment of the city’s lower-income residents in less glitzy neighborhoods. Dramatic changes in the city’s population and economy were part of the story. Between 1950 and 1980, Chicago’s population declined by a whopping 600,000 persons. Remaining residents were often poorer than those who had departed for leafy suburbs or the booming cities of the nation’s southwest such as Los Angeles, Houston, and Phoenix. Dramatic population losses during those decades accompanied profound economic and political changes. During the late 1940s and extending for decades, the rapid diminution of manufacturing resulted in unemployment for thousands of industrial workers. Vacated factories, abandoned warehouses, and empty retail shops pockmarked the cityscape.

Policies conceived in Washington, DC contributed to the changed fortunes of the largest U.S. cities. Beginning in the 1930s, funding for such federal programs as slum clearance and public housing paled in comparison with government aid for suburbanization. Low-interest mortgage insurance, Veterans Administration loans, tax breaks for homeowners instead of renters, and high-speed expressways that whisked commuters and shoppers in and out of downtowns made possible the sprawl of ranch houses and apartment complexes throughout the crabgrass frontier. Suburban construction of shopping centers and other commercial properties likewise benefited from federal policies because tax write-offs for new construction far exceeded the amount allowed for the renovation of aging structures. As big-city mayors
complained, federal policies underwrote metropolitan decentralization to the detriment of inner cities.

Urban renewal, the most important federal effort to aid metropolises in the post–World War II years, fell short of undoing the damage in two landmark pieces of legislation. The Taft-Ellender-Wagner Housing Act of 1949 provided for a modicum of public housing only as an adjunct to slum clearance and downtown revitalization. Coupled with the Housing Act of 1954, which decreased requirements for residential projects and increased the amount of funds that could be spent on office towers, hospitals, universities, and stadiums, the 1949 law became largely a vehicle for constructing office buildings, parking garages, swank apartment complexes, and retail outlets. Disillusionment with urban renewal grew in the 1950s and 1960s amid ongoing population loss and racial conflict. Most Americans judged President Lyndon B. Johnson’s urban reform efforts, especially the Great Society and Model Cities programs, as little more than costly failures.

As conditions in cities deteriorated in the 1970s, Washington, DC, retreated from its urban engagement rooted in the 1930s and capped by Johnson’s War on Poverty in the 1960s. Trumpeting a series of “new federalisms” that put the onus for urban reform squarely on local government, a series of presidential administrations sharply reduced aid to cities. The Ronald W. Reagan White House inflicted draconian budget cuts in the 1980s, but the support from other administrations was nearly as meager. Eliminating entire urban programs and drastically trimming budgets for others, the Department of Housing and Urban Development and other federal agencies sent a clear message to local officials that they needed to procure their own funding sources. The need for public-private partnerships and creative fiscal management took on a new importance. And at the same time, federal policies still permitted mayors and local business leaders to make important decisions both about whether to develop public housing, expressways, and urban renewal projects and where those vast undertakings would be located. Here were all the makings for a vast assault on African American and low-income neighborhoods, even before the financial squeeze hit full force.

In the hardening political economy of the postwar decades, Mayor Richard J. Daley and his business allies scrambled for economic solutions. But their search never included a quest for citywide projects, or even projects that would have applied equally among an increasingly diverse population that included recent arrivals from Mexico, Puerto Rico, southern-born African Americans, and Pacific Rim nations. Instead, the city’s business and political leaders had started to believe that upscale shopping, fancy offices, convention centers, new sports arenas, and the like would soon return visitors and suburbanites back downtown, one still populated by white persons.
Indeed, if redevelopment proved successful, well-heeled members of the middle class would return to live in upscale apartments and condominiums. Surely, the fabulous shops and offices along North Michigan Avenue, the developer Arthur Rubloff’s Miracle Mile, offered a daily and incontrovertible statement about how catering to well-off shoppers and businesspeople seeking prestigious office space led to rising property values, improved tax revenues, more jobs, and impressive sales increases. White women were supposed to shop on North Michigan Avenue—with heavy shopping bags delivered to their homes by uniformed drivers. Like New York’s Fifth Avenue, Rubloff’s Miracle Mile was a brand, a gendered lifestyle, and a demographic that many sought to emulate.

North Michigan Avenue was only one among Rubloff’s successful investments. Yet comparatively few took notice of the fact that Rubloff located another development, Evergreen Plaza Shopping Center, just beyond the city’s border on the Far South Side. As early as the 1950s, Rubloff and countless developers like him were already creating a zero-sum game for the affluent shoppers’ attention, dollars, and prestige. Whether on North Michigan Avenue or at Evergreen Plaza, moreover, Rubloff-style prosperity for white families extended only a short distance in any direction. Chicagoans, we recognized, were increasingly poor and nonwhite. Even as high school students staring out of windows from the city’s buses and subway trains, we and our peers could not fail to identify the stark divides of wealth and race that characterized Chicago’s neighborhoods. In later years, we came to understand that residence in any number of South Side communities guaranteed that no bank would make a home or business loan. Job losses and racial hatreds abided in the realms in which the city’s growing African American population reached young adulthood. Regardless of neighborhood, Chicago’s racial politics were unyielding, no more so than when Chicagoans elected Harold L. Washington the city’s first African American mayor (1983–1987). Washington attempted to shift resources to impoverished neighborhoods but achieved few successes during his brief time in office.

To put the matter in bluntest form, Chicago’s business and political leaders had determined to invest in downtown and disinvest in African American neighborhoods. During the course of more than seventy years since World War II, city officials delivered basic services irregularly to Austin, West Garfield Park, Englewood, Pullman, and other declining communities; young black males suffered constant harassment and severe beatings (some lethal) from white police officers given carte blanche authority to administer a harsh and unyielding street justice to people of color. Racial inequality and segregation took a heavy toll in another zero-sum game. City hall kept the lion’s share of the city’s resources close to home, to spend in pursuit of downtown improvements. Using urban-renewal projects such as new hospitals, wide highways like the Congress Street Expressway, and other measures, Daley and
city officials sought to isolate the downtown from black incursions. Such policies and practices aimed at exclusion meant not only keeping unwanted minorities from residing too close to the central business district but also limiting the number of black shoppers on downtown streets. As the city’s demographics changed in the last decades of the twentieth century, the same strictures applied to the rapidly growing Latinx population. In the minds of the mayor and the city’s commercial elite, the Loop, North Michigan Avenue, and the adjacent area north of the Chicago River needed to remain the privileged domain of white bankers, lawyers, commodities traders, merchants, and shoppers. As we began this study, our understanding of Chicago’s downtown and neighborhood politics served as a point of departure for understanding an identical focus in five other American cities. Years spent in musty archives, library stacks, and online sources also guided our research in new and exciting directions. Pittsburgh, we learned, served as an important idea center for downtown-oriented politics.

After World War II, the nation’s business and political leaders regularly sought to emulate the Pittsburgh Renaissance. By the early 1950s, a sparkling lineup of skyscrapers in the Steel City stood as the undisputed showpiece of a modern and prosperous downtown. During the next twenty years, photographs of those new buildings, bathed in sunlight, circulated widely in the United States and overseas, attracting appreciative visitors. Delegations of business executives and politicians traveled by train and airplane to Pittsburgh to learn how Richard King Mellon, a wealthy executive, and Mayor David L. Lawrence, with his strong political and union connections, had collaborated to bring the Renaissance into existence. Visitors heard a consistent report. From 1943 on, Mellon and Lawrence were laser-focused on eliminating the city’s choking smoke, preventing periodic floods, and making the downtown a center of business and cultural life once again. Mellon occupied the senior position in contact with Mayor Lawrence and in relationships with Pittsburgh’s business leaders. A note or telephone call from Mellon was certain to rivet the attention of a holdout executive, especially in the first years of renewal, when reducing the use of coal in factories and locomotives loomed as the day’s largest political battle. By any calculus, the Mellon-Lawrence combination presented a difficult-to-beat combination in fostering Pittsburgh’s downtown redevelopment. But controlling smoke and floods were not the only topics on the lists of concerns for visitors to big-city downtowns, or even the most important ones. Sophisticated politicians like Daley and St. Louis mayor Raymond R. Tucker had not trekked to Pittsburgh only to relearn dull ideas about city departments and the formal workings of city councils, taught routinely in high school civics classes.

Pittsburgh’s visitors included mayors Daley and Tucker, along with top business leaders such as beer baron August A. “Gussie” Busch Jr. During
dinners over thick steaks, mixed drinks, cigars, and cigarettes, the visitors inquired at length about how the unusual Mellon-Lawrence combination actually held such wide sway in Pittsburgh politics. Lawrence and Mellon co-operated with one another and top business leaders to clear small shops and aging stores from prime downtown property. Equally, executives and politicians from every city asked how Pittsburgh officials and planners had acquired the legal and political muscle that were prerequisite to moving and keeping African Americans away from downtown. In short, Mayors Daley and Tucker and every member of their large delegations wanted a list of ingredients in Mellon and Lawrence’s political sauce.

Yet those big plans conceived on Pittsburgh tours seldom turned into equally grand projects in the visitor’s home cities. The fruits of the visits to Pittsburgh’s aluminum-sheathed buildings and dinnertime conversations with prosperous Pittsburgh business executives possessed a limited shelf life once visitors returned to the hubbub of daily politics and dealmaking. And still more important, advice about creating vast, racially charged clearance projects did not translate easily and directly into hoped-for renewal in downtown St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, or Philadelphia, the five cities in this case study.

Downtown renewal programs in each of our cities nonetheless lurched forward, often without cohesive and coherent leadership. Bulldozers in African American neighborhoods launched massive highway projects. Detroit mayor Albert E. Cobo and Cleveland planner Ernest J. Bohn countenanced the removal of thousands of poor and working-class residents for the construction of expressways they deemed essential to downtown redevelopment. From the late 1950s, St. Louis mayor Tucker and his business allies presided over the clearance of a vast African American area adjoining downtown; and, in the mid-1960s, Tucker approved clearance of another area—right in downtown—to construct a new stadium for the Cardinals baseball club. In Philadelphia, William L. Rafsky, a political activist and long-time city employee, guided expressway construction, built public housing, and coordinated construction of downtown skyscrapers and upscale housing near Independence Hall. Up to the 1970s, Rafsky also presided over programs that relocated thousands of African American households and lured a small number of upper-income white households downtown.

All in all, mayors and council members in each of our cities, including Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, still searched for resources to support police and fire departments and aging schools. Nor during those postwar years had sophisticated city leaders like Philadelphia’s Rafsky figured out ways to reverse financial losses, halt their city’s population exodus, or stop the disappearance of jobs to suburbs or into nonexistence. None of these harsh changes was racially neutral, moreover. The cost of building downtowns during
those years as well as the steep job losses fell most heavily on each city’s resi-
dents of color. After World War II, race was a visible and ineradicable part of
the policy regimes that governed the nation’s aging industrial cities.

From the 1970s and extending for the next five decades, members of suc-
ceeding generations of business and political leaders in our five cities sought
once again to remedy population losses, unrelieved poverty, and racial ha-
treds. In each city, we learned, mayors like Detroit’s Coleman A. Young and
Cleveland’s Michael R. White still awarded precedence to downtown renew-
al rather than to the repair of aging neighborhoods and dilapidated schools.
But in their singular focus on downtown, we discovered, city officials no lon-
ger routinely sanctioned the bulldozing of African American neighborhoods.
The emphasis in every city, however, remained on development of flashy sta-
diums, additional expressways, and upscale hotels. In Cleveland, each mayor
starting with George V. Voinovich (1980–1989) worked with business leaders
to make downtown a fun place to gamble, watch a baseball game or a regatta,
and visit the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Money, prestige, jobs, taxes, race, and a desire to remain a factor in an un-
ending scramble toward urban greatness resided at the center of this down-
town-centered politics. In any city, few white executives or top political of-
ciallys (white as well as black) doubted that the path to downtown’s restored
image had to include a refurbished convention center and airport improve-
ments. Lacking funds to maintain even basic services like police and schools,
however, leaders such as Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick (2002–2008) ap-
proached bankers and credit-rating agencies such as Standard and Poor’s
almost hat in hand. And, as yet an additional approach to securing a steady
income, or at least a cash infusion, Chicago mayor Richard M. Daley (1989–
2011) sold municipal assets such as parking meters and the Chicago Skyway
(a toll bridge). From the 1970s on, every Detroit mayor promised that casinos
would shore up the city’s diminished finances, but gambling riches proved
illusory. And from the 1990s on, a succession of Detroit mayors simply
turned over downtown redevelopment to wealthy businesspeople such as
Daniel Gilbert of Quicken Loans and Michael Ilitch Sr. of Little Caesars.
Gilbert, at the mayor’s request, led an audacious—but ultimately unsuccess-
ful—effort to win one of Amazon’s planned headquarters sites for his city.
Detroit, by Gilbert’s reckoning, still deserved a place on a list of important
U.S. cities.

In this environment, officials in every city also adopted a softer tone in
their dealings with financial agencies and wealthy executives. During the
mid-1990s, business-friendly Philadelphia mayor Edward G. Rendell “de-
developed a kind of cult status among analysts and investors, who associate[d]
virtually all of the city’s turnaround to his dynamic personality and opti-
mism.” Still, critics—and there were many—described these newer ap-
proaches to downtown development with words such as privatization and neoliberal, a concept that historian Harold James contended in 2020 was “a go-to term for denunciation.” But there is no doubt that mayors like Rendell awarded high marks to any program that would raise their city’s credit rating from the B to the A range.

From the 1970s on, hospital growth appeared to offer a long-sought-after device to ease urban finances and to short-circuit job and population losses. Hospitals such as Barnes-Jewish in St. Louis managed urban renewal projects, including efforts to coax wealthier families back to the city—and, better still, those costly renewal programs resided off the city’s books. Hospitals created jobs. Rush Medical Center in Chicago and the world-renowned Cleveland Clinic employed thousands, including well-paid administrators and medical specialists. They purchased supplies locally, creating more jobs and taxpaying businesses. Small wonder that top hospital administrators took their place on city leadership committees.

No one or two themes explain the tumult and complexity of urban change across more than seven decades. We are certain, however, that politics—informed each day by ideas about race—resided at the center of that change. The elected officials and powerful businessmen who worked in tandem gained the upper hand in local government and made the decisions that shaped urban redevelopment. We are equally certain that those leaders, amid the non-stop upheavals, continued to make downtown the focal point of that politics. Accordingly, we have highlighted the inestimable role played by key individuals—entrepreneurs and politicians—whose decisions largely determined the fortunes of the five cities. Neither remote global forces nor the unknowable operation of “the market” accounted for the decisions made in city after city to prioritize downtown redevelopment.