City Building on the Eastern Frontier

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Vernacular Urbanism and the Mercantile Network of New Cities

Vernacular urbanism: Both a type of urban settlement and a method of urban analysis. This approach focuses on the ordinary city rather than the extraordinary metropolis. It emphasizes nonacademic design rather than professional planning and social implications rather than formal analysis. Vernacular urbanism interprets a cityscape as a cultural construct whose streets and buildings result from both the physical construction and social production of urban space.

Sorting: The intentional process of ordering activities, buildings, and people within urban space in response to a dominant culture’s notions of good urban form. In the nineteenth century, a pervasive mercantile ethos resulted in new cities whose public spaces of commercial, industrial, and civic activity were geographically, functionally, architecturally, and socially sorted to enhance a self-fulfilling image of economic vitality and bourgeois gentility.

During the early nineteenth century westward expansion was not only pushing the frontiers of the nation through the Midwest but was also redoubling on itself as the undeveloped portions of the eastern colonial states became more intensively settled. Accelerated by the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, white settlement of the New York interior had actually begun shortly following the American Revolution with the clarification of state boundaries, the extinguishing of Native American land rights, the government distribution of bounty lands for military service, and the entrepreneurial reselling of vast tracts of land. The state’s demographics were radically shifting. Seventy-five percent of New York’s population clustered along the exclamation point of New York City and the Hudson River Valley in 1785, but by 1820 the ratios had reversed, and three-quarters of the population now lived to the north and west of Albany.¹

The roving journalist William Leete Stone toured the curious new settlements of upstate New York in 1820 (Fig. 1). Stone observed firsthand that
urban beginnings were messy and questionable. Traveling along the first completed stretch of the Erie Canal, his packet boat emerged from the dusky wilderness into Syracuse, a clearing hacked out of the swampy forest. As the last rays of daylight bleakly illuminated the settlement, Stone spotted a scattering of shabby wooden houses constructed amid the stumps of recently felled trees. Marooned for the night, he lodged at a miserable tavern frequented by local salt boilers whose “wild visages, beards thick and long, and matted hair” presented “a group of about as rough-looking specimens of humanity ever seen.” It snowed that dreary October night, and the next day he found “the morning aspect of the country even more dismal than the evening before.”

Syracuse’s chief booster, Joshua Forman—the lawyer, land agent, and partial proprietor who had recently commissioned a new urban plat—pressed the chagrined traveler for his impressions. “Mr. Forman,” castigated Stone, “Do you call this a village? It would make an owl weep to fly over it!” “Never mind,” replied the optimistic Forman, “you will live to see it a city yet!”

The built environment could undermine an urban identity, but it could also promote one. Despite necessarily primitive beginnings, mythologized in genesis stories such as these, the new nineteenth-century cities along New York’s frontier quickly displayed the principle of sorting, which guided their layout and permeated subsequent developments. By agreeing with his dubious visitor, the booster Joshua Forman showed that he too was culturally literate about how to read a city and, by extension, was knowledgeable about what his new city needed in order to be legible. Although it was imperceptible to Stone, rough-edged Syracuse was already taking sorted shape. An inn at the crossroads and a sawmill by the stream staked out two separate nodes for commerce and industry. But the new city lacked the critical mass of either buildings or settlers to make its urban armature or aspirations apparent.

A mere nine years later Stone would return and declare that upstart Syracuse had been transformed: “Another enchanted city, I exclaimed, as I glanced upward and around upon splendid hotels and rows of massive buildings in all directions—crowded too, with people, all full of life and activity! . . . For if noble ranges of buildings, two or three large and tasteful churches, busy wharves and streets, and all the life and animation of a large commercial place will constitute a city, then, most assuredly Syracuse may be called by that name.” Being without a municipal charter until 1848, and thus not a city in the legal sense, Syracuse had nonetheless attained the sta-
tus of a city in Stone’s eyes. It was not simply the architecture but also its arrangement into discernible nodes. Stone had observed three sorted districts: a bustling commercial landscape of hotels and business rows, a transport landscape of wharves and canal-side warehouses, and a civic landscape of churches and county buildings. Although closely spaced within the confines of a small city boasting perhaps two thousand residents, these three functions were legibly discrete and thus had pushed Syracuse across the urban threshold.⁵

The fact that these new nineteenth-century cities were ordered and sorted—functionally, architecturally, and even socially—forces a reconsideration of the urban typologies and processes that have been commonly used to categorize nineteenth-century urbanization. Building upon the work of Sam Bass Warner, Jr., historians have traditionally identified two American urban archetypes bracketing the nineteenth century. First came the small-scaled, socially and functionally mixed cityscape—typically called the “walking city”—which hallmarked the compact, pedestrian-scaled city. By the end of the century the walking city had evolved into the large metropolitan cityscape of distinct commercial, industrial, and residential districts, including “streetcar suburbs” that were enabled by technological and transportation improvements.⁶

The walking city model has undergone continuous reappraisal. Warner originally acknowledged that there was some geographic sorting by function within the walking city: “for all its conglomeration of little buildings, the early big city was not a disorganized hodgepodge.”⁷ But much of the focus on sorting has been on the definition of residential districts, particularly the rise of bourgeois residential neighborhoods, where class consciousness became an impetus for sorting.⁸ Early commercial buildings were often combination shop houses, and this mix of residence and work has blurred the presence of functionally discrete districts, leading to the erroneous interpretation that, as long as work and home were combined in one premise or even in the same neighborhood, there was little, if any, functional and spatial differentiation.⁹ This assumption is incorrect. Even when people lived where they worked, there could still be occupational segmentation, such as commercial districts, milling districts, or warehousing districts. The shop, not the house, was the primary attribute that identified the district. The assumption that residential use contaminates or lessens the resolution of a commercial or industrial district is a twentieth-century, post-zoning construct, not a nineteenth-century tenet. Historical studies that
have focused on social sorting and housing variety have, nonetheless, valuably advanced the idea that the compact, preindustrial city may have been more sorted than first thought.

The walking city paradigm nonetheless turns out to be an inapt description of the pedestrian-scaled, highly sorted cities that were created de novo during the nineteenth century. The walking city model is predicated upon the examples of mature, East Coast, major metropolises with colonial underpinnings. The nineteenth-century inland city sorted into commercial, industrial, and sometimes civic districts arose out of a different set of conditions. Their very youth set the new cities apart. Their newness was part of the challenge to city founder and settler alike, but it was also a rich opportunity. After visiting the new city of Rochester, one traveler concluded that “progress, there, cannot fail to be rapid, when, in addition to manifest physical advantages, still imperfectly developed, the blood of the whole city is new, untied and untrammelled by old notions, or hampered by forefather prejudices.”

The marvel of seemingly overnight urbanization in the interior led many travelers, including the English woman Fanny Trollope, to exclaim that “Rochester is one of the most famous of the cities built on the Jack and Bean-stalk principle.” As speculators staked out new towns across a wooded landscape, these new settlements on America’s eastern frontier were windows into a new era of city building and a new opportunity to rethink the role and design of cities.

Built, paradoxically, within a nineteenth-century frontier of a seventeenth-century state, New York State’s sorted cities were constructed physically on a white man’s tabula rasa but construed conceptually as part of an established political economy that led back to Albany and New York City. A generation before places such as Syracuse or Rochester were laid out, the state and speculators were preparing inland New York for economic development. New turnpikes stretched across the southern, middle, and northern tiers of the state. A surveyors’ net of squared counties and townships checkered the landscape. A smattering of settlements were already planted, and investors marked promising sites for urban and economic development. As the social historian F. C. Wallace has summarized, “by the time the common ‘pioneer’ himself arrived, the land had been explored, bought from the Indians, garrisoned, pacified, partially surveyed, mapped, and picked over by land companies, public officials, and private speculators seeking the most probable localities for quick profit.” Being neither isolated outposts in the far west nor fully integrated cogs in the Atlantic economy, the new frontier cities of New York were commercial ventures consciously de-
signed to create profits. The state legislators who financed transportation improvements, the autonomous city founders who platted the new settlements, and the independent settlers who built them envisioned the new cities as links in a mercantilist market chain being forged from one end of the state to the other.

The new cities Syracuse and Rochester were part of a common vernacular landscape of independent urban speculations in the New York interior. In size and type both cities represent a more common urban category than the metropolitan stars that dominate urban historiography. By 1820 there were only five cities in the United States with populations between 25,000 and 125,000. There were, however, another 56 cities numbering from 2,500 to 24,999, including Rochester, with 2,063 residents, but excluding Syracuse, which had probably fewer than 50 settlers. A decade later Rochester had risen to 9,207 residents, and Syracuse boasted 2,565. Indeed, nineteenth-century urbanization can be characterized as the efflorescence of new and small cities. Using the conservative measure of 2,500 inhabitants, an urban threshold used in midcentury censuses, the number of cities rose dramatically from 33 in 1800 to 2,128 by 1900. Only a small percentage of this increase was the result of colonial villages growing into cities. Most of the growth was caused by the creation of completely new settlements. Of the 124 largest ranking cities in 1890, only 19 had exhibited a measurable and independent existence in the 1790 census. Rochester and Syracuse were two of those newly emergent cities.

The founding of Rochester began in 1803, when three business partners from Hagerstown, Maryland, joined forces to purchase from the Pul-teney Estate a failed mill site on one hundred acres of land on the west side of the Upper Falls of the Genesee River, just seven miles from its discharge into Lake Ontario. By the time Nathaniel Rochester, William Fitzhugh, and Charles Carroll finally gained clear title in 1811, they had expanded their plans from reviving the mill site to planning an entire city within the nearly square boundaries of the so-called 100–Acre Tract. Having moved to New York State in 1810, Nathaniel Rochester served as project overseer, platting the city and earning the honor of naming the great venture that he actively promoted (Fig. 2).

The genesis of Syracuse began in 1804 when the state sold 250 acres of land to Abraham Walton of Utica in order to finance the construction of turnpikes that would help develop the freight potential of its Salt Springs Reservation as well as open the marshy area for settlement. Located a few miles south of Salina, which had been laid out in 1798 as the administra-
tive center for the state’s salt reservation, the irregular shape of the Walton Tract reflected creative surveying designed to include as much dry land as possible. In fulfillment of the state’s sales stipulation, Walton had an inn and mill constructed, but land speculation rather than actual settlement was the order of the day. The slowness of the settlement to take hold is indicated in its frequent name changes in vernacular usage. As a nod to the very first innkeeper, the settlement was known as “Bogardus Corners” until 1809, then grandly as “Milan” until 1812, then in the shadow of Salina as “South Salina” until 1817, then in reference to the new innkeeper as “Cossitts Corner” until 1817, and then classically as “Corinth” until 1820. Needing a name unduplicated elsewhere in the state in order to get a post office established, the local investor John Wilkinson tapped into the popularity of classical place names and proposed the name Syracuse in reference to the ancient Italian city that similarly had salt springs and a freshwater lake. Development of the boggy settlement lagged until the state announced the routing of the incipient Erie Canal through the village. In 1819, under the direction of the Onondaga Hollow resident and land promoter Joshua Forman, the old tract was resurveyed, platted into a core of urban lots and a periphery of farm lots. Matters looked promising, and Forman moved to the rejuvenated experiment of Syracuse that year (Fig. 4).17

Vernacular Urbanism and Spatial Culture

Syracuse and Rochester, the new cities that are the focus of this study, developed in a way best explained within the context of what may be called “vernacular urbanism.” This term borrows from the subject and method of vernacular architecture studies, with its emphasis on the ordinary over the extraordinary, nonacademic design over professional or tutored design, and social over formal analysis. Syracuse and Rochester were, if not quite ordinary in their success, certainly part of a large wave of new city speculations during the early nineteenth century. Their focus on commercial and industrial opportunities put the cities squarely within the territorial and mercantile expansion of the United States. Although the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 secured their fortunes, even as flourishing canal towns they were part of a familiar city building phenomena of seemingly instant sensations. Following his Erie Canal tour, the author Nathaniel Hawthorne surmised, “surely, the water of this canal must be the most fertilizing of all fluids; for it causes towns . . . to spring up.”18

In addition to identifying a common urban type, the label of vernacu-
Vernacular urbanism implies a process of design which is not limited to the purview of trained specialists. These new cities are certainly part of the history of urban planning, but they were not designed by professional planners. Rather, they were created by entrepreneurs working with and as surveyors to lay out an urban plan. Nathaniel Rochester and Enos Stone worked side by side in laying out Rochester’s plan for his city. Joshua Forman similarly directed his brother Owen Forman and associate John Wilkinson in the 1819 laying out of Syracuse. These city founders were tutored neither in the art of design nor in the economics of development but were de facto planners by dint of their experience on the land and their plans for the future. Just as vernacular architecture can imply non-architect design, vernacular urbanism can imply nonplanners.

Vernacular urbanism also connotes a method of historical analysis which investigates the social constructions behind spatial practices, or what may be called “spatial culture.” Spatial culture can be understood as a type of equation. One factor is the physical city: the relatively static, formal arrangement of buildings and lots and street patterns. The other factor is the human interaction within the urban container: the fluidity of use and meaning inscribed on the built environment by the ways in which people used (or were inhibited from using) that space functionally, socially, and culturally. Together the physical and the social combined to create the sum that is spatial culture, the aggregate organizational principles that governed urban space.¹⁹

This beginning definition of spatial culture is not quite complete, as it addresses the processes that shaped the city but not the objectives behind it. In working toward a spatialized approach to urban anthropology, Setha Low uses the mutually complementary perspectives of the “social production” and the “social construction” of space. The social production of space, Low argues, includes “social, economic, ideological, and technical [factors] whose intended goal is the physical creation of the material setting.”²⁰ In contrast, the social construction of space is “reserved for the phenomenological and symbolic experience of space as mediated by social processes such as exchange, conflict, and control.”²¹ These perspectives add the important element of intent behind spatial practices by recognizing that there are no absolute or neutral spatial practices since all actions emerge from an ideological base, whether consciously acknowledged or not. Spatial culture acknowledges physical space as an active agent in the shaping of notoriously ethereal social relations. It equally acknowledges the ways that human behavior can challenge or reinforce the meaning of physical space within the city. Examining the spatial culture of the new nineteenth-
century city injects human agency and cultural conditions into understanding the design of cities and buildings.

The spatial culture of the new city reflected the depths to which the commercialization of the landscape had permeated the social construction of urban society in antebellum America. Analyzing the spatial culture of the new cities provides a method to conceptualize the forces at work which shaped the sorted cityscape. New York’s chain of towns, loosely gridded plans, divided districts, architectural refinements, and even standards of public behavior within public space were forged by culturally conditioned choices. Despite being founded and settled by quite autonomous and unrelated individuals, the similarity between the functionally, architecturally, and socially sorted spatial cultures of Rochester and Syracuse suggests a common culture of city building common to the eastern frontier. More specifically, the spatial hierarchies inherent in the functionally, architecturally, and socially sorted cityscapes suggest the power of the merchant and professional classes and the presence of dominating commercial motives in the discourse and practice of city building at the time. The sorted cityscape highlighted a presumption of economic diversity, market efficiencies, extra-local connections, and urban maturity. The sorted cityscape was both style and substance. Its distinct commercial, industrial, and eventually civic districts articulated the merchant-led economic and cultural colonization of the hinterland.

The tripartite sorted cityscape was not atomized by its separate districts but, rather, was connected and defined through them. The conceptual term cityscape connotes a perceptible set of relationships which constituted the whole of the city in its own time. Contrasting the ideas of “land” versus “landscape,” the cultural geographer J. B. Jackson concluded that all “scapes” are collections of related things organized as parts of a greater system with a sense of purpose to and interrelatedness among all the parts. A scape, therefore, is an arranged environment, be it a landscape, townscape, or cityscape. But the suffix scape implies not only the calculation to arrange the parts but also a recognition of the pattern. As a concept, a cityscape is not simply the sum total of the city’s parts. It is the mental organization of classified parts and hence a subjective creation on the part of both the founders who conceived it and the observers who perceived it. Both the intentional arrangement and the reflective acknowledgment of the schema sets a cityscape apart from a city or a landscape apart from land. The sorted cityscape was a cultural artifact meant to be understood by its diffuse audience.
Although a landscape is no longer limited to its original meaning as a type of painting, there is nonetheless a pictorial element in the creation of any scape. A scape is a picture in the mind’s eye. The organizing system within a cityscape includes a degree of aesthetic consciousness. It is something that is perceived by those who shape, view, or experience the totality of the place. Both to construct and to comprehend a cityscape require reflection and a shared pattern of language. Since a cityscape is space arranged in a way that is meant to be understood by visitors and residents, the clearest cityscapes will therefore use the most common, legible, and easy to understand constructions and arrangements. Nonetheless, a cityscape is always a subjective interpretation of urban space, architectural form, and social meaning. This is the paradox of cityscapes, since cities are notoriously untidy and incomprehensible in their totality: the intentions behind cityscapes are varied, the interrelatedness of the parts are not always readily apparent, and the people who are creating and perceiving the cityscape are often themselves anonymous or invisible. Yet cityscapes are created, organized artifices.

The new city’s sorted cityscape was an assemblage of pieces of urban space knitted into a coherent whole. Sorting was a system of classifying space into individual pieces and then recognizing the connections among those spaces. The sorted city was not an accident. Anything constructed by humans is the result of decision making, and environments are no exception. The presence, the location, and the appearances of the districts were products of a series of deliberate decisions made from the time of platting through the actual construction of buildings and use of city space. While the rise of commercial and manufacturing districts in particular is often dismissed as a natural evolution, space does not sort itself out; people do the sorting. A landscape, as John Stilgoe convincingly asserted, “happens not by chance but by contrivance, by premeditation, by design.” So, too, a cityscape, including one that was sorted.

The Commercial Culture of Improvement and the Rise of the Merchant’s City

New nineteenth-century cities led by a productive merchant and manufacturer elite turned the antiurbanist’s arguments on their head. Despite Thomas Jefferson’s famed warning that the great cities were “pestilential to the morals, the health and the liberties of man,” New York’s new cities were more commonly heralded by politicians and businessmen as champions
of economic progress which in turn instilled social and cultural improvement. The antiurban rhetoric of the corrupting influence of the city was being challenged by two new moral imperatives of particular appeal to city builders: the twin virtues of creating economic productivity and carrying civilization. The commingling of these two principles eventually found its voice in the expansionist doctrine of Manifest Destiny but very quickly influenced the substance and style of discussions on improving the state’s hinterland. Contemporaries championed cities as vital contributors in developing the agricultural countryside. As commercial entrepôts, cities made agriculture itself profitable while also increasing the market reach of merchants and manufacturers. As social centers, they touched the isolated farmsteads and encouraged a more refined urban culture in the settled areas. Cities were vehicles of improvement.

During the wave of territorial expansion following the American Revolution, cities played a major role in the settlement of the Midwest and the infilling of the eastern frontier. In his 1827 anniversary address to the New York Historical Society, Joseph Blount extolled the urban transformation of both the state and the nation: “Instead of several distinct communities, thinly scattered through thirteen provinces along the sea-coast, we find a dense and united population pouring into the interior, accompanied by the arts of civilization, and the refinements of social and cultivated communities. Educated and intelligent man is taking the place of the savage, and is fast advancing to the borders of the Pacific ocean, making the wilderness to smile like a garden, and sowing towns and villages as it were broadcast through the country.” A generation later the public was still amazed at the ongoing transformation of New York. A passage written in 1848 by the Virginian J. C. Myers following his journey through upstate New York illustrated a similar appreciation for urbanization as a vehicle for a moralized economic improvement: “I viewed with surprise the numerous handsome and flourishing cities, towns, and villages which I passed through since leaving the city of Schenectady. . . . My surprise was still increased, when informed that they were more numerous from Rome westward, . . . Here then I had another opportunity of reading in bold characters, the noble enterprise and industry of the northern man.” Myers was silent regarding the physical form of these new urban centers, but his word choices of enterprise and industry doubly resonate. These heroic platitudes, synonymous with diligence and effort, captured the idea of hard work justifiably rewarded by profit and progress. The descriptors enterprise and industry also began to limn the very commercial and industrial activities that steered
urban development. As templates for development, these two economic activities would be inscribed into the plats of new cities.

The idea of improvement permeated public discussions on settlement in general and urbanization in particular. While touring Rochester in 1827, the Englishman Basil Hall had opportunity to ruminate on the term:

It may be proper to remark, that about this period I began to learn that in America the word improvement, which, in England, means making things better, signifies in that country, an augmentation in the number of houses and people, and, above all, in the amount of acres of cleared land. It is laid down by the Americans as an admitted maxim, to doubt the solidity of which never enters any man’s head for an instant, that a rapid increase of population is, to all intents and purposes, tantamount to an increase of national greatness and power, as well as an increase of individual happiness and prosperity.\(^{32}\)

*Improvement* was a multivalent term that carried connotations of personal progress in intellectual, spiritual, or social matters as well as connotations of economic or productive progress through some sort of value-added process of work. Noah Webster’s nineteenth-century American dictionary revealed the nuances of the word.\(^{33}\) The first definition, “Advancement in moral worth, learning, wisdom, skill, or other excellence,” captured social, spiritual, and intellectual values. The second, “Melioration; a making or growing better, or more valuable; as the improvement of barren or exhausted land; the improvement of the roads,” touched on the physical. Another definition explored the idea of best and highest use: “Use or employment to beneficial purposes; a turning to good account.” Webster’s *improvement* blended work, productivity, progress, and righteousness.

During the nineteenth century this complex notion of improvement permeated the Anglo-American capitalist culture of land use and became an articulated legal value that was protected under the American judicial system. Overriding other variables in evaluating property rights cases, the courts consistently gave preference to the best and highest use of a property, to economically productive activities over non- or less-productive ones. In so doing, the courts effectively subsidized the nation’s economic growth by privileging profitable utility (or improvement) over other activities or values.\(^{34}\)

The civilizing and moralizing aspect of “best and highest use” infiltrated the public discourse on settling the frontier with the assumption that productive and profitable landscapes were more righteous than were unimproved landscapes and that the greater the impact, the greater the good.
Commercialized agriculture was better than subsistence agriculture. Commercialized towns centrifugally feeding a mercantile network were superior to country towns serving a centripetal market. This line of reasoning fed into a stream of urban justifications that argued cities were correctives to a dereliction of economic and cultural opportunity and thus were agents of an improved civilization. City building was acquiring a moral tinge. In fact, Webster tapped directly into urbanization’s link to physical and social progress when he expounded on his fourth definition of *improvement* with the statement “I look upon your city as the best place of improvement.”

Joshua Forman’s oration at the 1825 Syracuse celebration of the Erie Canal captured the spirit of the age, linking the issues of frontier settlement, transportation, civilization, and mercantilist revenue all under the rubric of *improvement*:

> To what extent this course of improvement may be carried, it is impossible for any mere man to conjecture; but no reasonable man can doubt, that it will continue its progress, until our wide and fertile territory shall be filled with a more dense, intelligent, and happy people. . . . It has long been the subject of fearful apprehension to the patriots of the Atlantic States that the remote interior situation of our country (for want of proper stimuli to industry and a free intercourse, with the rest of the world) would be filled with a semi-barbarous population un congenial with their Atlantic neighbors, but the introduction of steamboats . . . and canals . . . promise the wide spread regions of the west all the blessings of a sea-bord district. But while we contemplate the advantages of this work, as a source of revenue to the State, and of wealth and comfort to our citizens, let us never forget the means by which it has been accomplished.

The rise of the market economy in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America contributed to this instrumental use of cities to promote regional development. Commercial and manufacturing towns were envisioned as links in a wider mercantile chain of improvement. The market, and the related topic of transportation, dominated much of the public discussions on the settling of central and western New York, influencing the vision of cities and, ultimately, their physical form. Frontier landholders framed the issues of settlement around the production and consumption of resources and goods, setting the commercial tone for developments. They called for the state to invest in internal improvements that would specifically enhance the commercialization of agriculture and with it the commercial and urban development of central and western New York. As early as 1791, the New York governor was exhorting the state legislature to approve internal trans-
portation bills, arguing that the rapid increase in frontier settlements “must yield extensive resources and a profitable commerce,” provided links could be established.38

Politicians, developers, and settlers agreed that transportation was the key to unlocking the interior’s potential for commercially conditioned physical and cultural improvement. The first calls were for roads; then came the outlandish proposals for a statewide canal linking Buffalo on Lake Erie to Albany on the Hudson River and thence to the New York City harbor and the Atlantic world. Governor DeWitt Clinton continually stumped for public support for the Erie Canal, painting a picture of a veritable floating market: “boats loaded with flour, pork, beef, pot and pearl ashes, flaxseed, wheat, barley, corn, hemp, wool, flax, iron, lead, copper, salt, gypsum, coal, tar, peltry, ginseng, bees-wax, cheese, butter, lard, staves, lumber.” Clinton’s vision of bountiful productivity explicitly carried biblical conviction as well. Quoting the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, Clinton predicted that the canal would transform New York State, “the wilderness and the solitary place will become glad, and the desert will rejoice and blossom as the rose.”40

The rhetoric of commercial opportunity pulsed through inland urbanization. Cities and transportation went hand in hand in maximizing the economic potential of the whole state. An 1816 canal proposal noted, “new markets will be opened by increasing population, enlarging old and erecting new towns, augmenting individual and aggregate wealth, and extending foreign commerce.”41 A western New Yorker pointed out that linking “the eastern markets and the interior . . . would secure to our own people the full benefit of their industry, their traffic and commerce, and build up our own towns and seaports.”42 These newly built-up towns would be the hinges between production and consumption, stimulating and serving the demand for goods and services within their regions and ultimately linking western and eastern markets.43 When Henry O’Reilly wrote his four-hundred-page Sketches of Rochester in 1838, he included a chapter on “Progress of Improvement” which gave credit to the highways, canals, and railroads.44 A toast at the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 wittily pointed out America’s productive pragmatism: “To America, cutting canals while Europe is cutting heads.”45

City founders paid particular attention to the existence or possibility of transportation improvements that would link their settlement to the nation’s market chain. Although both Rochester and Syracuse were created before the Erie Canal was planned, the road-rich cities subsequently capitalized on their place along the “artificial river.”46 At the Rochester opening
of the Erie Canal, the city builder Nathaniel Rochester offered his toast: “the greatest publick [sic] work in America, if not in the world. A principal link in the chain that binds the Union of the States.”\textsuperscript{47} The Syracuse booster Joshua Forman similarly toasted: “our village is the offspring of the canal and, with the county, must partake largely of its blessings.”\textsuperscript{48}

Promoters envisioned roads, canals, and later railroads as tools for maximizing potential across the state and as solutions to the mercantilist desire to keep profits within the state. The agricultural quickening of western New York with Genesee wheat and the industrialization of the state salt reservation in central New York was under way by the late eighteenth century, but the lack of convenient markets diverted profits and stymied production. In 1807 the surveyor Benjamin DeWitt devised an organic analogy to illustrate the market relationships of eastern and western New York and the necessity of reliable transport in maintaining the state’s “body economic”: “Let us consider the city of New-York as the centre of commerce, or the heart of the State, Hudson’s river as the main artery, the turnpike roads leading from it as so many great branches extending to the extremities, from which diverge the innumerable small ramifications or common roads into the whole body and substance; these again send off the capillary branches, or private roads, to all the individual farms, which may be considered as the secretory organs, generating the produce and wealth of the state.”\textsuperscript{49} New roads or canals linking the western and central portions of the state with Albany (and thence down the Hudson River to New York City) would redirect the flow of profits that had previously found easier outlets via Lake Ontario to British Canada or via the Susquehanna River to Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{50}

Mercantilist improvement was not the only objective behind urbanization. Social and cultural improvement also factored into the discussions of a commercialized landscape threaded with roads and canals. The white, propertied, merchant class developed their argument that commercial cities were positive agents of social change, first by eliminating Native Americans and then by disciplining slovenly frontiersmen. J. C. Myers, who had been so struck by New York’s urban chain, heroicized the efforts and products of his fellow white, male, Americans: “The noble enterprise of the white man has so changed the aspect of this region, that upon every hand attractive beauty meets the eye.”\textsuperscript{51} His physical evidence was not a landscape but a cityscape. “Here now far and wide the aboriginal forest has lost its charms of savage wildness, by the beauties of cities, towns, and villages and the intrusion of railroads and canals.”\textsuperscript{52} The eradication of the Native American
landscape, conceived by whites as a landscape of underutilized and lost opportunity, and its replacement with the merchant and manufacturer’s cityscape became a tautological defense for urbanization.\textsuperscript{53}

In lobbying for transportation investments, a Buffalo landowner and congressman warned against a lopsided social and economic landscape that had “merchants, manufacturers, and agriculturists” in the eastern half of the state but only farmers in the west.\textsuperscript{54} Boosters argued that urbanization enlightened the scattered white settlers who had grown slothful through poverty and isolation on their farms. In 1810 an Erie Canal promoter linked moral salvation and economic opportunity: “The object of a wise legislature is to promote industry and virtue in the state, but we know that people who live far from market, and cannot sell their produce, naturally become indolent and vicious. Having little to do, they do less. . . . There are people in the western country, settled on a bountiful soil, who do not raise a bushel of grain except what is eaten by the family, or what is made into whiskey, for the purpose of drowning thought, and destroying soul and body.”\textsuperscript{55} In an 1832 lecture entitled “The Moral and Other Indirect Influences of Railroads” the speaker argued that “society alone is a rich source of education and improvement . . . [and] society [is] better in cities than in towns, in towns than in villages, and in villages than in country places.”\textsuperscript{56} The rural countryside could no longer be counted on as the locus of moral or cultural supremacy, concluded the editor of \textit{Harper’s New Monthly Magazine} in 1855. “It is plain that the great things in history have not been done in the country,” he argued; instead, it was the city where one celebrated “the triumphs of literature, of art, and benevolence.”\textsuperscript{57}

A commercial, capitalist urbanism was seen as a civilizing, democratizing, and moralizing force. The physical and temporal overlap of New York’s “burned over district” during the Second Great Awakening of Protestant revivalism and the early-nineteenth-century commercial infilling of interior further blended the two perspectives into a moralized economy of development. Markets and morality combined in the new virtue of capitalism. Indeed, city building became imbued with a certain religious and social righteousness. Recalling the first twenty years of Rochester’s history, one of the first residents proudly wrote: “The place grows rapidly about us—and instead of the wilderness that frowned here in 1813, a city now is here teeming with people and with business, and spires are seen, as it were pointing the wayward and thoughtless to a better & more permanent city, ‘it made with hands eternal in the heavens.’”\textsuperscript{58} Cities, according to this argument, were not Jefferson’s feared sores on the body politic but were fruit-
ful contributors to national strength. When Putnam’s Monthly Magazine declared in 1855, “the great phenomenon of the Age is the growth of great cities,” it was with pride, not apprehension.\(^5^9\)

The similarity of choices made by the city founders and settlers shows how deeply the culture of commercial development had infiltrated ideas about the role and form of cities. The sites for Rochester and Syracuse offered their own natural advantages, but their city founders envisioned them as more than processing centers for the region’s raw resources. Rochester abutted the great milling power of the Genesee River Falls, a great asset in a wheat-growing region, but its founders chose a grander scheme than a simple mill site. Syracuse was created out of land sold by the state in order to finance road construction, yet the Syracuse promoters envisioned a more ambitiously urban future than a simple way station. Conceived within an emerging commercialization of the landscape—commercialized agriculture, commercialized processing of raw resources, and commercialized settlements to export western and import eastern products—city builders platted these new cities to tap into the growing market economy.\(^6^0\) They laid out cities designed for local, regional, and distant commerce and industry and sought county seat status to boost their political and economic centrality within their markets.

Given the rhetoric of commercial settlements contributing to the economic and moral improvement of the interior, it is little wonder that the white male merchant entered as the figurehead in public discussions and public culture. The nineteenth-century business publisher Freeman Hunt lauded the urban merchant as the agent of commercialism who not only civilized but also democratized the landscape. Preaching to the choir, he pointed out that commerce— unlike the medical, legal, or ministerial professions—was itself a democratic profession that could be practiced by all without specialized training. Moreover, the profession provided a service to humanity by creating wealth. That wealth could then be reinvested in the community. “It is evident,” Hunt concluded, “how much we owe to Commerce, and how greatly we depend upon our merchants, for our means both of social progress and religious effort.”\(^6^1\)

The self-interested reciprocity between mercantile city planting and the merchant class who planted them is perhaps not surprising but does merit deeper investigation about the ways in which these specifically bourgeois class interests shaped the physical and social construction of the new city.\(^6^2\) The new ideology of commercial improvement created both a physical and a discursive space for a new, commercial elite. Merchant interests played a
large part in constructing the economic colonization of New York; as a result, the history and culture of the new cities were deeply rooted in entrepreneurship, and the cities they bullyied into existence bore their stamp economically, politically, physically, architecturally, and socially. Social and political rewards went to those entrepreneurs who risked their economic capital in making the urban venture a success, either as city founders, merchant millers, or merchant shopkeepers. Economic investment translated into social and political opportunity, prerogative, and privilege.

Entitlement born of economic and political power further translated into social and cultural hegemony as well as spatial privilege within the city. “It is not stating the truth too strongly to say that America is proud of her merchants,” wrote Hunt, “in fact it is another name for gentleman among us.”63 The historian David Scobey uses the term bourgeois urbanism to capture the importance of class in shaping the city of New York, specifically that class of “propertied, professional, and genteel” men who held the wealth, political power, and cultural authority that permitted them to conflate nation building, city building, and class formation in one grand gesture.64 That cultural authority extended to the hinterland as well. In his study of the urbanization of rural New England the historian Richard Brown has contended that a business class—composed largely of merchants, millers, lawyers, printers, and artisans—“exercised a disproportionate role in bringing urban culture to the countryside.”65 More specifically, he argued that they integrated the Second Great Awakening’s emphasis on individual spiritual regeneration with a secular component that included active citizenship, self-development, and cultural engagement with the wider world—all of which endowed them greater confidence and even authority in local matters.66 Paul Johnson’s study of Rochester’s class relations richly demonstrated the depth to which the emerging merchant class, whose outlook blended a businesslike, urban, bourgeois, and religious tinge, dominated the city.67 In 1842, after visiting America, “that vast counting-house that lies beyond the Atlantic,” Charles Dickens concluded that it seemed as though “everybody is a merchant” sharing a “national love of trade.”68 While not a universal sentiment, this love of trade was held by the dominant class of white, male, businessmen whose economic and cultural status was in ascendancy and who had led the mercantilist city-building efforts since the turn of the century.

The rhetoric of commercial urbanization which surrounded the infill-
ing of New York’s frontier made only the barest of allusions about the form these new cities would take. The attention was on what the cities should do,
rather than what they should look like or the manner in which they should be organized. But the dialogues about transportation, agriculture, commerce, manufacturing, and social improvements pointed some city builders in the direction of a cityscape functionally sorted by the type of improvement.

The commercialized idea of improvement was inscribed into, indeed abetted by, the urban, architectural, and social fabric of the new cities. The commercial elites who largely dominated the rhetoric and financed the actual building schemes of inland settlement imprinted their notions of good urban form on the landscape. Good urban form began as cityscapes sorted by function, a sorting that maximized the land’s economic utility and advertised its economic opportunity. Under the leadership of the merchants and millers, good urban form shouldered additional responsibilities of being a managed social landscape as well. The sorted city was the product of a commercially oriented, merchant-led initiative to improve the interior. Urban morphology, building type and style, and the social use of public space were all manipulated to create a merchants’ city that suited their complex urban agendas. A sorted cityscape provided a powerful template and rhetorical tool in demonstrating a new city’s balanced and integrated economy as quickly as possible. The commerce of retail and wholesale trading, the industry of milling or shipping, and even the social improvement of churchgoing or civil governance could all be given physical form, as evinced in William Leete Stone’s recognition that “noble ranges of buildings, two or three large and tasteful churches, busy wharves and streets, and all the life and animation of a large commercial place” constituted a city.”

An Albany newspaper echoed these sentiments in its 1824 account of the new interior cities, whose commercial, industrial, and civic buildings were beacons of economic and cultural progress: “Your eye is regaled with the most beautiful scenery. At one time you pass through an old settlement, and again you witness nature just submitting to the strong hand of cultivation. You observe the progress of art from the log hut of a squatter, the illegal settler; the comfortable farm house; the village just bustling into existence, and flourishing town with its gilded spires, bustling streets, and active industry.” The cityscape was proof of improvement.