City Building on the Eastern Frontier

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By midcentury the new cities had firmly taken hold. In 1840 Rochester’s population reached 20,200, and by 1858 it had doubled to nearly 44,000 residents. Syracuse was smaller but similarly prosperous. In 1840 Syracuse and Salina together had 11,000 residents, by 1858 over 25,000.1 In 1841 John Barber and Henry Howe published the first edition of their illustrated gazetteer of New York State, which included “faithful representations” capturing the essence of each notable city (Figs. 16–17).2 Both Rochester and Syracuse required several views, one of the city center and another of the mills and saltworks at the edge. By emphasizing the cities’ commercial, industrial, and civic districts in their engravings, the gazetteers tapped into the cultural currency of the sorted cityscape as the urban standard. By emphasizing the distinct districts within the cities, Barber and Howe showed that thirty years after their founding the sorted cityscape continued to have cultural currency in the appraisal of a city. In fact, Barber and Howe specifically stated that Syracuse “now has a city-like appearance.”3

The illustrations of the “central part” of both Syracuse and Rochester also showed that aesthetic standards had been raised in the commercial district. Showy pieces of architecture shared the street with uniform rows of buildings, evincing improved building standards and a heightened taste for beauty and style. The “faithful representations,” of course, carried an equal dose of idealization in the extreme tidiness of the view, but the bias in the view making attested to a preference for that visual order.

Appearances had always mattered. The very premise of a legibly sorted city demanded that it be apparent, but the standards of what those appearances should be shifted after the first wave of settlement. Having survived the first urban shake-outs that saw some settlements disappear and others be absorbed into nearby rivals, settlers and investors set their sights on a higher standard that demanded architectural and urban refinements. City leaders largely rejected the notion of beauty for beauty’s sake but pragmat-
ically incorporated ideas about the utility of aesthetics into their building efforts.

The higher architectural standards emanated from an aesthetic shift that paralleled the rise of the middle class as the cultural authority in the cities. The merchant and professional class that had invested in the settling of the city assumed a sort of “merchant oblige” to improve it culturally as well. Entrepreneurship was in essence a sign of good citizenship in the new city’s urban society, and the merchant’s risk taking and economic investment led to his social capital. The intensity of entrepreneurial commitment, not necessarily the results, mattered. Even after a number of Rochester’s leading merchants went bankrupt and were forced to vacate their costly homes and give up control of their businesses, they were not forced to relinquish their social status in the community they had led. In aspiring to the mantle of urban tastemaker, the middle class worked at fashioning a cityscape that, not coincidentally, served their own twinned interests of mercantile development and cultural display. General urban boosterism continued to underlie much of their efforts, but it was a promotionalism that particularly targeted like-minded aspirants.

The attention on the three distinct districts which had percolated through the planning and initial building of the new city shifted to a tighter focus on the commercial district as a symbolic space during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Reflecting its prominence within the traveler’s orbit, the residents’ daily lives, the merchants’ world, and the very identification of the new settlements as commercial cities, the commercial district became the touchstone in urban evaluations. Based on the architectural and social scene at Clinton Square, one traveler declared Syracuse a “city-looking” place: “I was agreeably surprised to find this village (as the inhabitants with amazing modesty still continue to call it) in reality a very large and city-looking town, with wide and well-paved streets, lofty brick houses, fine stores, and an air of business-doing on an extensive scale.” Borrowing metropolitan metaphors, the commercial district symbolized the city. During the 1840s one traveler applied the Broadway analogy to Rochester. “Between sundown and nine in the evening, Main [Buffalo] Street, from State to the east side of the River, presents a fair and full miniature of Broadway in New York, by the throng of people passing to and fro. So dense is the crowd that one is compelled to elbow his way along the best way they can.” Vandewater’s oft-reprinted Tourist Guide concluded in 1831 that Rochester was “the most extensive, populous, and important place in the western country. It has been termed the ‘Western New-York.’”
construction of new hotels and the continuous street wall of buildings in Syracuse similarly gave the city “the appearance of New-York in miniature.”

The commercial district was becoming the epitome of the city. The two terms were nearly synonymous. One Rochesterian recalled that the phrase “going down to the city” meant the same as “going to the Four Corners.”

The creation in 1853 of a strictly business directory for Syracuse was evidence of not only the growth of the commercial district but also the district’s importance to the overall stature of the city. Urban pride as much as commercial complexity, the publisher explained, compelled such a directory. “The features here delineated we think will render it a *vade mecum* with all classes of our citizens. Other cities have possessed such publications for years; and certainly it is high time to Syracusans to lay aside their village habits and ideas, and fill the measure of municipal importance.”

The proof of a city lay in its business and commercial activity.

The merchant leaders targeted the commercial district for architectural and social refinements. Landmark buildings that responded to changing tastes in fashion became one vehicle through which the business community promoted the new settlements as not only economically vital but also culturally sophisticated, amenity-filled cities. Built on prominent lots within the commercial district and designed to be architecturally eye-catching, the hotels and largest stores became urban benchmarks for both residents and travelers. Stylish architecture helped move the reputations of the cities from simply being places of economic opportunity to becoming places of true urban and urbane life. Architectural design also codified the divisions between the adjacent commercial and industrial districts and reinforced the sorted template of the cityscape.

The aestheticized commercial district, however, was not just about architectural detailing. The practice of aesthetics in the new city included a spatial aesthetic as well. Tidiness and order were a “look” as well as a system that could be found in the repetition of a store’s bays, the vertical plane of the shop-front walls, the uniform projection of shop-front awnings, and the unencumbered space of the pedestrian sidewalks in front. The transformation of the new city’s commercial district between the first stage of settlement and the second stage of refinement showed how deeply an aesthetic of beauty and order dominated the merchants’ architectural and spatial practices. The social implications of this refinement will be examined in the next chapter, but the focus here is on understanding the visual implications of the buildings as architectural set pieces and the roles such “sets” played in articulating the mercantile cityscape. Expanding the early-
nineteenth-century creed that framed economic productivity as the key urban virtue, the second generation of city builders began to see beauty as an overlooked contributor to an urban commonweal.

Adding architectural beauty to the list of civic virtues was such a novel concept that its advocates struggled to find the right word to describe their holistic vision of what we would today call “urban design.” The anonymous author of an 1830 article published in the *American Journal of Science and Arts* apologized for his inexact title of “Architecture,” explaining: “my remarks will also take a wider range, and embrace a science, for which I cannot find a name, for the good reason, that among the nations from which we draw our language, no such science could be known. I mean the choice of position, and the planning of towns, with the grounds and appurtenances connected with them.” Although he was unsure about the label to put on his thinking, the author was quite confident in his subject, a critique of contemporary urban and architectural practices. He rejected the mercantile city, with its gridded streets and commercial priorities, and replaced it with his vision of a city built for visual effect and civic inclinations. Beauty, he charged, had been wrongfully neglected as an important consideration when laying out or building up cities. Although he named no particular offenders, Syracuse and Rochester were certainly vulnerable to his reproach.

The critic sketched out his antidote to the dullness of what he called cities of “squares or rectangular parallelograms,” replacing them with his “beau ideal of a town” which combined convenience, symmetry, neatness, variety, and beauty (Fig. 18). He specifically cautioned readers that his illustration was not a blueprint but, rather, a schematic diagram “to elucidate my remarks.” His proposed beaux ideals were far removed from the prosaic concerns that had guided mercantile city builders at the turn of the century. Instead of profits and efficiency, aesthetics and civic space dominated the diagram. He proposed a public green with a fountain, wooded alleés, a civic building on a central eminence, a street lined with churches and banks, a bluff capped by a handsome dwelling or a public monument, bending and offset streets for surprising views, and avenues focused upon distant pillars or obelisks. Some of these ideas echoed the monumental tradition of European grand manner planning, while others presaged late-nineteenth-century organic, townscape planning. Virtually all of them rejected the values and appearances of the mercantile city, which he described as “calculated for dull labor, or lynx-eyed gain.”

In the critic’s urban vision the commercial was subordinated to the civic. His proposal was grounded in a clear valuing of shared civic spaces,
available to all, and experienced through a meditative ramble or an inspira-

tional vista. This genteel view was essentially an elitist one that omitted
the role or space of industry and commerce in favor of nonproductive uses,
but it was also a people-centered view that paid attention to the qualitative
experience of place rather than the efficiency of it. Civic values, however pre-
sumptive, structured this educated and leisured commonwealth of bour-
geois citizens who had the time and sensitivity to appreciate the artful plans.

Although the ideology of such a city was antithetical to the mercantile
city that subordinated the civic to the commercial, the argument for aes-
thetics did not go unheeded by the second generation of city builders, who
found ways to embellish their commercially conditioned public space. The
first generation of settlers in Syracuse and Rochester had not incorporated
the obvious markers of civic space, such as parks, civic squares, or monu-
ments, which the anonymous critic argued would inspire people to love the
city. The second generation showed no inclination to abandon its “paral-
lelograms” of commercially productive broad streets for the curving sway
of a charming boulevard. Yet an acceptance of the pragmatic utility of ap-
pearances ran deeply through both generations. The deliberate construc-
tion of a sorted cityscape acknowledged that appearances mattered, but it
was no longer enough just to show that an aborning city boasted civic, com-
mercial, and industrial districts. The cityscape now needed to present a cer-
tain kind of sophistication which showed that the cities were economically
and culturally au courant and not a stagnating or primitive backwater.

For a new city still competing for human and economic capital, archi-
tecture was a tool of enticement. Mobile Americans had a choice of where
to live and where to stake their future, and they sized up a community in
part on its buildings. As the anonymous urban critic had warned: “We are
a calculating people, sufficiently attentive to present interests. . . . We are
also a travelling people . . . with abundant opportunity for comparing places
and scenes with one another, [and] we are gradually forming a pretty cor-
rect judgment, as to the beauties of a landscape or town. . . . This is shown
in the crowds that gather to the deck of a . . . canal boat, as a . . . handsome
village is approached and is heard in the murmur of approbation among
little groups of such travellers.”\textsuperscript{15} The peripatetic public was a discerning
one, inclined to pass judgment on the newest of settlements. Thus, “before
many years, he who will wish a town \textit{to flourish} . . . will have to consult not
only health and convenience, but also beauty and good taste.”\textsuperscript{16} Settlements
courting a population needed to cater to a public with an ever increasing
urban and architectural literacy.
The owner of the Erie Canal “Rocket Lines” invoked aesthetic pragmatism in his request to the New York canal board for permission to build a ticket office on the state-owned berm of the canal embankment. Proposing a one-story building of cut stone ornamented by an iron railing, Van Patten explained that the Syracuse city authorities had indicated “if it were under their control, they should cheerfully grant the Petition as they thought an office of that description would not only be useful but ornamental.” Attraction to aesthetics, particularly those held by the scouting public, was of instrumental value to building a city.

Even the landscaping of the cityscape became a cause for improvement. With the first days of swamp and wood now behind them, residents adopted a more forgiving attitude toward nature. The first generation cut down trees to clear a city, and the second generation planted them to beautify it. Without a trace of irony, in 1829 a Syracuse newspaper urged its citizens to ornament the urban landscape by planting trees. “There’s nothing which contributes more to the embellishment and comfort of a town than the growth of shade trees. . . . Every additional tree tends to beautify and improve the city and to increase the value of individual property.”

Beauty had pragmatic utility. The call for a landscape within the cityscape was issued again in the late 1830s by E. W. Leavenworth, the president of the Syracuse city council. Playing the expected role of a spirited public servant, he was “always zealous in the interest of the aesthetic side of improvements and labored for broad streets, more parks, and shade trees.” Under his leadership the elite residential squares of Fayette Park and Forman Square were protected from the incursion of turnpike and railroad, and the railroad company was required to plant shade trees along its path through Washington Street.

The author of “Architecture” was not the only critic calling for a new focus on architecture as both a symbol and method of achieving moral culture. In 1841 the nationally disseminated, Rochester-published Genesee Farmer urged families to pay attention to the message that their homes communicated. Viewing the derelict state of housing along the canal, one author chided, “here was no decoration, and I argue concerning this settlement, that there are no intellectual pleasures, no taste, no gentleness, no fireside happiness.” The author assumed that “every reader has many times seen the same thing, and some have already learned the connection between simple decoration and domestic virtue and peace.” The same theme of the moral power of design was picked up in Catherine Beecher’s treatise on domestic design, in which she stressed the need for health,
comfort, and beauty in the home. “For while the aesthetic element must be subordinate . . . it yet holds a place of great significance among the influences which make home happy and attractive, which give it a constant and wholesome power over the young, and contributes much to the education of the entire household in refinement, intellectual development, and moral sensibility.”

If domestic architecture could be linked to domestic virtue, then it followed that public architecture measured public virtue. Indeed, following her short stopover in Syracuse, the author Eliza Steele concluded that, although the city was “still in its tens,” it nonetheless presented “several good churches, a pretty court house, substantial warehouses, numerous shops and dwellings, with a lyceum and high school, so that it would seem the inhabitants ought to be wealthy, refined, and well educated.”

Architecture was a window into social, cultural, and moral character of the settler and settlement. Without losing the core principal of economic growth, urban planning principals in the new cities were adding the aspiration of a cultural morality that conflated character and style.

Once again the business class took charge of the physical buildup of the city’s public face. The new cities had started out as explicitly mercantile ventures, and the merchants’ interests had been equated with the public interest. As the cities and popular ideas of good urban design evolved, the commercial leaders continued in their leadership role, this time adopting the aesthetics of high style and tidy order in their architectural practices. In 1840 David Buel, an attorney and businessman in Troy, New York, called for his city’s architectural rejuvenation. Troy’s second-generation residents were in a similar position to review their course of urban progress since the city’s 1797 founding. Buel urged his fellow businessmen to meet their paternalist obligation of urban improvement by becoming patrons of the arts and commissioning institutions and edifices whose purpose and style would add honor to the city:

In modern cities, the highest achievements in the useful and ornamental arts have been made under commercial patronage. Even in the middle ages, the finest specimens of architecture, the best models of paintings and sculpture, and the most splendid collections of books, were called into existence by the commercial communities of Venice, Bilboa, Naples and Florence. At this moment both in Europe and our own country, the architect, the painter, the sculptor and the author, must seek his principal patronage in commercial communities. It is time that our city should take some decisive steps in rearing institutions calculated to improve the intellect, cultivate the taste,
and afford occupation and enjoyment to the minds of those who now inhabit
the city, and of those who shall come after us. The beauty and elegance of
our streets and dwellings, excite the attention of strangers.25

The notion that the business community should lead in the patronage
of the arts, coupled with the prominence of the commercial district as the
most frequented and noticeable district in the city and the steady infusion
of capital into commercial affairs, all translated into businesses being the
first to receive architectural improvement. In a piece of architectural criti-
cism published in 1864, James Jackson Jarves reviewed recent building
trends and lauded the rise of “solid and handsome blocks of stores, in more
or less good taste, appropriate to their purpose, effective as street architec-
ture, and novel in many of their features.”26 Although personally disap-
pointed by the crass emphasis on commerce, he was encouraged by any
signs of architectural affection. “If a knowledge of the fundamental prin-
ciples of architecture equaling the zeal displayed in building could be
spread among all classes, a better order of things would soon appear.”27
Commercial buildings had acquired the patina of honorable exemplar, and
the paternalist merchant was now a good citizen who constructed credits
to his community. Such merchant oblige not only served the cause of the
commercial city but also reinforced the merchant’s cultural leadership
within the social hierarchy of the city.

Hotels and the Commercial District

An inn was part of the grander mercantilist scheme of improving the inte-
rior. Inns were the first buildings constructed as intentional landmark
pieces of architecture intended to promote the city to outsiders. Hotels pro-
vided necessary services for residents and served as stage sets crafted for
bourgeois sociability. First-generation inns were harbingers of, even pre-
requisites to, urbanization. A backwater inn, explained the historian Daniel
Boorstin, was designed “not to serve cities but to build them.”28 Catering to
both settlers and travelers seeking room and board, inns were necessities
in the sparsely inhabited regions. Inns were recognized as critical settle-
ment building stimuli, so much so that the 1804 contract between New
York State and Abraham Walton stipulated that he must erect an inn on his
250–acre tract. However rustic, Bogardus Inn served not only the new
settlement that would become Syracuse but also all the towns in the vicin-
ity of the Seneca Turnpike. The state’s belief that an inn would stimulate
development was repeated in new towns across the country, leading the Englishman Anthony Trollope to note: “when the new hotel rises up in the wilderness, it is presumed that people will come here with the express object of inhabiting it. The hotel itself will create a population.” In the United States, he concluded, towns “run to the . . . hotels.”

A town’s first inn could be quite rudimentary. William Leete Stone suffered his first night in Syracuse in that state-mandated inn built by Bogardus. Despite the close quarters on the canal boats, some travelers, such as the emigrant scout John Howison, preferred to spend the night there rather than to endure Bogardus’s old inn, hardly good press for the new settlement. The inn may have served the immediate local needs but lagged in its ability to promote the settlement to newcomers.

Within a decade of settlement innkeepers began to invest in not only increasingly stylish and accommodating quarters but also, quite simply, more hotels. A cosmopolitan Argentine taking the Erie Canal passage concluded that any town of substance had at least two hotels. Nathaniel Hawthorne was more amused than persuaded by the quarters he saw on his 1835 Erie Canal voyage, noting that every urban aspiring village held “generally two taverns, bearing over their piazzas the pompous titles of ‘hotel,’ ‘exchange,’ ‘tontine,’ or ‘coffee-house.’” Indeed, both Syracuse and Rochester quickly displayed several hotels, including showy hotels in prominent locations and farmers’ inns on the edges of town.

The conduct of business, the running of local government, and simple sociability all happened in the downtown hotels. It was almost as a secondary feature that hotels rented out lodgings and served meals to the overnight travelers and long-term residents who boarded rather than setting up household. The hotels’ intensive use day and night gave them a special prominence and visibility in the city. As such, city promoters targeted them as the first buildings to be constructed and remodeled. These second-generation hotels, with their stylish facades and increased public amenities of public halls and parlors in addition to barrooms, pushed a settlement one step closer to architectural and institutional urbane.

Hotels were integrated into the conduct of daily business. In a city bereft of other public space, the bars and parlors were typically the primary meeting places, both official and spontaneous. The public sought out the ground-floor common room, with its assortment of newspapers, fliers, residents, and travelers who might offer up promising bits of news, gossip, and insights. When the Rochester proprietor of the United States Hotel on Buffalo Street remodeled his facility at the outer edge of the commercial
district, he said little about the sleeping chambers but reminded the public that it was “a convenient resort for men of business, as it is but a few minutes walk from it to the Banks and Post-Office” that were located at the Four Corners. Similarly, shopkeepers used the Syracuse House and Mansion House hotels as coordinates for locating their businesses in town. The most prominent hotels rented quarters to banks. Located at the Four Corners, the Rochester Eagle Hotel featured the Bank of Monroe in its corner office (Fig. 31). Prominently linking Clinton and Hanover squares, the corner Syracuse House rented quarters to the Onondaga County Bank.

In the absence of city halls, hotel assembly rooms were deputized for the running of local government business, prompting entrepreneurs to construct “courthouse” hotels to tap into this market. After the Monroe County courthouse was completed in 1822, the Monroe (later National) House hotel arose across the street. Following the construction of the compromise courthouse in between the two settlements of Salina and Syracuse, the Center House hotel (aptly named for being centered between the two cities) arose next door. The sequence was reversed in 1856, when Colonel Vorhees maneuvered to get the new Onondaga County courthouse constructed next door to his hotel at Clinton Square. Particular hotels became aligned with specific political parties. During the 1820s the competing Clinton House and Rochester House hotels both opened on Exchange Street facing Child’s Basin. Their names were honorific, paying respects to the city founder, Nathaniel Rochester, and to the Erie Canal champion Governor DeWitt Clinton. But they were also factional, alluding to the pro–Van Buren Republicanism that Nathaniel Rochester backed, in opposition to the Clinton-associated Federalism favored by other prominent merchant-millers in the city.

In 1820, when a new hotel was planned diagonally across Salina Street from the aged Mansion House, its builders were aiming for a quality piece of architecture on a prominent corner which promoted the economic potential and cultural cachet of Syracuse to outsiders. The decision to build solidly and stylishly was based in part on the investors’ conviction that the urban experiment was going to succeed and thus a more permanent building was warranted. It was also based on the boosterish conviction that architecture itself could promote more settlement and a better caliber of settlement. The propagandistic aspect to the new Syracuse House was acknowledged from the start. As one of the builders recalled, when the partners approached Joshua Forman to purchase the prominent lot at the hinge between Clinton and Hanover squares, they all agreed that something re-
remarkable should be erected: “Judge Forman was anxious that we should put up the best hotel west of Albany, as he thought it would be an inducement to others to purchase lots and start a village.” A sophisticated piece of architecture at the juncture of Clinton and Hanover squares, at the juncture of the canal and the turnpike, was perfectly placed to grab public attention. By the 1830s an estimated one thousand people a day passed through Syracuse by stage or canal. Hotels physically and impressionistically mediated a traveler’s experience of a place. The better the initial introduction to the city, the reasoning went, the better the ultimate verdict.

Completed in 1822, the brick, two-story, fifty-by-fifty-foot hotel eclipsed the frame inn built a generation earlier by Bogardus. An engraving drawn from the builder’s recollections showed a simple Federal-style building aggrandized by its brick construction and the contrast with its surroundings (Fig. 19). The interests of the hotel were inextricably tied to the interests of the city, and it was no coincidence that the name they chose for the new hotel was “Syracuse.” The Syracuse House stood poised to intercept travelers from the canal or turnpike and to persuade them of the city’s opportunities and civility.

It was a rocky start. Travelers were not impressed. One guest complained about the discrepancy between exterior polish of the “large building . . . promising in its appearance” and the disappointing accommodations: “oh such beds they had probably not been changed for the last month and were plentifully provided with every etcetera to render them uncomfortable.” A knickerbocker passing through breezily dismissed Syracuse as “rather on the decline if we were to judge of the appearance. . . . Hotel in a ruinous condition, a large substantial brick building, but scarcely a window in the establishment, which had not glass broken. Panes of glass mended by stuffing old rags in them. Economical in the extreme.” One of the builders died in a construction accident, and by 1827 his partner was forced to sell out to the Syracuse Company, the group of Albany investors who in 1824 had purchased the many unsold Walton Tract lots. Far from succeeding as an urban beacon, the Syracuse House bespoke of urban difficulties.

The better-capitalized Syracuse Company shared the convictions of its predecessors in the power of architecture as a place-making device. William James of the Syracuse Company declared that “the house was too low; that he would take it down and put up the best house in the State.” Resident Amos Granger urged them on in their building activities. “I am glad to hear that you have concluded to improve the sheds and back yard to the Syracuse House, both your interests and Rusts [the innkeeper] require this im-
As a nearby lot holder, Granger was personally interested in finding ways to stimulate the area; he had already been rebuffed in his attempts to get the Onondaga County courthouse located in Syracuse and was relieved to find an active champion in the Syracuse Company.

The rebuilt hotel was dramatically different from its predecessor and neighbors (Figs. 20–21). The new brick building rose four stories with a street-level veranda and continuous projecting galleries running along the facade at each story. The addition of three-story wings on Salina and Genesee streets further extended the hotel's urban presence and services. The showy Syracuse House was an architectural showpiece for a generation and a familiar landmark for a century. A picture of it even graced the locally minted three-dollar bill. One resident was dumbfounded: “It was the wonder of all that such a fine building should be put up in such a place. It was like a bouquet in a mud-hole.”

The flowering of such a bouquet indicated an agenda beyond simple utility. There was little local demand for such outsized and outlandish accommodations. When the Syracuse Company rebuilt the Syracuse House into a pretentious structure, it sacrificed short-term losses for long-term gain. The hotel was a showpiece to inspire local boosters and to bait travelers and travel writers into seeing Syracuse as a settled, mature, sophisticated, and amenity-offering place. This time the interior was as polished as the exterior, including a dining room whose walls and ceiling were “tastefully ornamented in continuous war scenes, which were pleasing and attractive.” The promoters were savvy. The hotel won plaudits from travelers and helped put Syracuse on the travelers’ map. Vandewater’s travel guide specifically praised the new Syracuse House as one of the best pieces of architecture in western New York. And it was following a satisfying tea in the Syracuse House that Eliza Steele ventured her favorable opinions about the caliber of the architecture and people of the city.

Located just south of the canal, the Syracuse House became the pivot between the original commercial district in Clinton Square on the west side of Salina Street and the expansion of commerce into the adjacent Hanover Square on the east side of Salina Street. It helped open Hanover Square for more intensive investment at the same time it flamboyantly anchored the southeast corner of Clinton Square. By giving luster to both zones, it doubly promoted the commercial potential of both sites as well as Syracuse in general.

As the primary property holder in Syracuse, the Syracuse Company had the interest and financial ability to influence the physical and architectural
development of the city. With the Syracuse House, they led by example, just as the architectural critics David Buel and J. J. Jarves had hoped. By setting an example, other lot holders might also be inspired to upgrade their buildings. One of the first ripples was the remodeling of the rival Mansion House, “a shabby patched up old concern” left over from Bogardus’s pioneer days, which fared poorly in comparison with the new hotel. \(^47\) Substantially remodeled by the new innkeeper, the Mansion House also offered amenities including a large assembly hall. According to Vandewater’s guide, a traveler’s first choice should be the Syracuse House, “a very extensive well-furnished hotel, and kept in the first style,” but the refurbished Mansion House was a respectable second. \(^48\) In 1845 the Mansion House was razed and replaced two years later by Vorhee’s Empire House hotel and its attached business block (Fig. 24).

The cascading benefits of a showy hotel were similarly evident in Rochester. In 1817 the Scrantom’s hewn log cabin on lot No. 1 was sold to make way for the Ensworth House. Although it was only frame, it made a large impression on visitors. A French traveler duly published his amazement at the cultural refinement found in a one-year-old hotel situated in a six-year-old settlement: “[I sat] at a table as delicately as it was correctly served. As in England, the forks are of steel and the spoons of silver. After dinner the cloth is removed and the table of well polished mahogany is covered with dessert which ordinarily consists of excellent native cheese, more or less ripe fruit, and berry preserves. It is at this moment that the conversation becomes animated, inspired by the Madeira wine which circulates around the table in crystal flagons. Who would not be astonished at so much luxury and refinement in a city which boasts but a few years existence?” \(^49\) By the late 1820s, in the face of rising competition by the flurry of hotel building in the commercial district, the Ensworth House needed to be rebuilt. The brick, patriotically renamed Eagle Tavern was not its last improvement. The tavern underwent yet another gentrification during the 1830s and 1840s, including a name upgrade to the Eagle Hotel, classical porticoes on the exterior, and refurbished parlors on the inside (Figs. 31–32). By then nine business hotels clustered near the spine of Buffalo Street, and all this hotel building prompted the *Albany Journal* to report that Rochester’s hotels “would reflect credit on any city.” \(^50\) Indeed, that was one of the key points behind the whole rebuilding: to promote the city to the outside world. Although Edwin Scrantom would publish in 1843 a piece of sheet music, “My Early Home,” with his family’s first Rochester cabin
depicted on the cover, the loss of the ancestral home was but a sentimental trope (Fig. 30). The log cabin so picturesquely drawn had charm precisely because it was long gone. Replaced by the Ensworth House and then the brick Eagle Hotel, the change in construction on the prominent Four Corners lot was the best sign of urban progress.

Commercial Rows and Business Blocks

Syracuse had rough beginnings, acknowledged one resident: “the place made no progress until the Syracuse Company built the Syracuse House.” As hoped, the architectural improvements initiated with the hotels spread to other buildings in the commercial district. In 1838 John Townsend of the Syracuse Company reported his satisfaction with the city’s improvement. Writing to his local agent, Townsend opined: “I have lately returned from Syracuse, where I have been attending to the business of the concern. The general appearance of the village is much improved & I think things look promising.”

Architectural appearances had always mattered to the Syracuse Company. After rebuilding the Syracuse House hotel, it continued to champion stylish buildings to bolster the image of the central city. Following an 1834 fire in Hanover Square, it worked with the owners to rebuild the low wood-framed shops into four-story brick buildings known as the Phoenix Buildings (Fig. 23). Although the south side of Hanover Square had not been damaged in the fire, the owners of these buildings also upgraded their holdings to keep pace with the Phoenix Buildings. Uniform rows of brick buildings three and four stories high with similar architectural detailings transformed the architecturally insignificant south side of the square into the titled Franklin Buildings.

The Syracuse Company engaged in rebuilding its own properties as well. In 1842 it razed its range of wooden, one- and two-story buildings on the south side of Clinton Square and erected the Townsend Block, a three-story Onondaga limestone edifice a full twenty bays wide featuring a central pediment that vaguely alluded to classical edifices and thereby nudged commercial architecture toward a more monumental, landmark-caliber building.

These changes served the new mercantile cities in three important ways. First, the construction of business rows and blocks underscored the ongoing significance of a sorted cityscape to the investors who were building the city. As the Barber and Howe illustrated gazetteer depicted and as
Vandewater’s travel guide concluded, these business rows clarified the first generation’s outline of the business district and gave it a distinctly commercial appearance, “the appearance of New-York in miniature.”

Second, the larger size of the buildings both abetted and expressed the expanding scale and capitalization of business in the city. In just five years, between 1842 and 1847, six sizable business blocks were erected in Syracuse, and the rapid pace of building continued into the 1850s and 1860s. The small “shop house” had given way to the “business row” of uniform shop fronts, typically only three bays wide but forming a contiguous row with its neighbors. Each business row typically housed several tenants within each slice of the building. The pumped-up “business blocks” were a midcentury variation on the business row. They were larger and visually conceived of as a unified whole, but internally they could continue the practice of quartering a variety of businesses or introduce the practice of a vertically integrated manufacturing, wholesaling, and retailing operation.

Third, the architectural style of the buildings was the merchants’ response to the new calls for architectural beauty as a civic good, particularly in commercial matters. The accentuated style of the new buildings, coupled with the repetition of buildings and the regulation of frontages and sidewalks, reflected a heightened aestheticism that pragmatically catered to multiple constituencies who cared about appearances and taste. The art critic’s encouragement, the merchant’s pride, and the traveler’s critique, converged on the shared values of beauty, regularity, and order.

During this period of architectural refinements in the new cities, from approximately the 1830s to the 1850s, merchants consciously introduced national trends in building style and type. Building first in a plain, flattened, Greek Revival style and then in the more ornamental, molded qualities of the Italianate, merchants constructed buildings that defied any urban identification as either upstart or provincial. The matching brick rows on Hanover Square were part of a national trend in urban architecture (Figs. 23, 24). The business row building type with its plain, workmanlike architectural details was repeated across Syracuse, Rochester, the state, and indeed urban America. These 1830s commercial buildings broke from the 1820s shorter, narrower, gable-roofed, shop houses that had abutted their neighbors without much regard for the aggregate view. The new commercial idiom was typically a three-bay, three- to four-story brick structure with solid piers at the ground level enframing French doors or large display windows composed of small panes of glass. The upper stories were pierced with regularly spaced sash windows set within flat stone sills and lintels.
The cornice of the shed roof was modestly embellished with brick dentils. The pattern of building was not just uniform; it was uniformly simple. The minimalist Greek Revival business rows rejected the ornate columned porticoes that graced the high-style merchant dwellings, but the bold simplicity of the rows was itself a confident statement of Spartan restraint and financial prudence. The workmanlike buildings outlining Clinton and Hanover Squares projected an image of a solid, flourishing commercial center and, by extension, city. The uniformity of the new business rows belied the fragmented pattern of landownership of the individual lots and indicated the consensual, or at least normative, vision of the way a proper commercial row should appear.56

Fashion is notoriously fickle. Writing later in the century, when architectural fashion mandated more ornamentation, the 1820s settler M. C. Hand felt that the Phoenix Buildings had not aged well. He described them as being designed by architects with “little conception of beauty or elegance.”57 Styles might change, but the power of style had not. By the 1850s speculators turned to the latest Italianate style, with its larger plate glass windows, and boldly molded sills, lintels, and scrolled bracketed cornices. New buildings in the newest style not only replaced older buildings in the city center but also were used to promote real estate ventures pushing at the margins of the brimming commercial districts, such as the new Pike Block on the corner of Fayette and South Salina streets (Fig. 29).

After purchasing a double lot in the middle of the block of South Salina Street between Fayette and Jefferson streets—three blocks south of Clinton Square—the entrepreneurial Henry Dillaye embarked on a study tour in New York City and Philadelphia looking for ideas to attract businesses and customers so far south of the canal. Dillaye returned with the plan of unifying the entire length of the block with uniform Italianate facades. Leading by example, he personally developed the two middle lots, constructing a five-story building trimmed with the latest in fashion, including four plate glass windows twelve feet high, molded cast-iron window hoods and sills that enframed the upper-story elongated windows, and scrolled brackets embellishing a projecting cornice. Dillaye’s improvements did not stop at the stoop; he removed the brick sidewalk and installed large flagstones in front of his store. Using his edifice as a prototype, Dillaye contracted with six other entrepreneurs to build like-designed buildings on either side; the sum of the parts formed the “Washington Block” (Fig. 28). The grand business block not only stimulated the economic development of South Salina Street, but it also reflected the new city’s architectural literacy and, hence,
economic and cultural parity with the established cities. As befit a city in
the mercantile chain, this city’s architecture reflected the movement of not
only goods but also ideas.

Ambitiously designed business blocks likewise arose in Rochester as
merchants sought to maximize their potential through aggressively showy
commercial architecture. The local press heralded merchants for their gifts
to the street. In 1848 the newspaper praised businessmen for the rarity of
hiring an architect to construct their new brick, three-story block on State
Street. Best of all, the newspaper stated, “we have guarantee, in the liber-
ality of the proprietors, and the taste and the skills of the architect, for the
belief that the new buildings will be ornaments to that section” of the city.58

Improvements in commercial architecture were eagerly followed. Situated
at the corner of Main and Liberty streets, on the east side of Rochester, the
1850 Emporium Buildings garnered much attention. Comprising a four-
story brick building that was divided into three separate storefronts of un-
equal width, each store had its own distinct plate glass windows, includ-
ing a rare circular one at the corner. Stone lintels hooded the windows, and
the facade was enlivened—“filled up” was the description—with cast-iron
ornaments.59

Looking back on Rochester’s transformation, the pioneer settler Ed-
ward Scrantom took pride in the improvements to his city’s commercial ar-
chitecture. The process began with facades that had started out with “small,
low doors, surmounted with fan-lights” only to be transformed into “larger
doors with shutters, and the ‘arcade’ doors, which was the last style.” Im-
provements in iron and glass advanced a more open aesthetic of smaller
structural members enfaming larger sheets of glass. Storefronts were
transformed by “the removal of the old fronts, with their heavy piers, and
substituting in their places the small fluted iron columns. The small glass
windows gave way for the larger glass—then the bow window and the square
projecting one with its four large lights, or it may be only one light.” Build-
ing upkeep joined with salesmanship. “Then the outside embellishing; the
paint and the putty, the iron awning frames, the gratings over the sidewalk
openings, and the plant balustrades on the roof, to represent another story
and afford advertising signs in great letters, to be read at a distance.” The
upgrading migrated to “inside improvements” as well with “the removing
of old partitions and putting in iron columns for supports, and back addi-
tions for sky-lights, and frescoing, and papering, and painting.” Architec-
tural beautification worked hand in hand with business promotion. “These
have been going on for the last twenty-five years with great profit to builders,
mechanics, and artificers of many kinds, and with renewed satisfaction year by year, to new adventurers in trade, anxious to put the best foot forward and keep up with the times.” Presentation, not just presence, now mattered.

Double Fronts

Within the compactness of the sorted city, the divisions between districts could be even more narrow than the slight alley that separated the Monroe County courthouse from the Buffalo Street shops. In the cities in which shipping formed a major part of the economy, property owners constructed single buildings oriented to two different economies and transportation paths. The construction of double-fronted buildings—one facing the commercial-oriented street and the other facing the shipping-oriented canal or river—showed just how narrowly the dividing lines could be drawn in the sorted city.

Bifurcated buildings reflected both the commingling of retailing and wholesaling practices in a single site as well as the desire and ability to segment those differences. In the newest settlements most store owners were primarily wholesalers who supplied the needs of the surrounding settlers, who were themselves trying to carve out a living. Some of a storekeeper’s stocks would, of course, have been sold at retail to local end users, but wholesaling protected the merchant from fluctuations in the local economy. Wholesalers who were selling from a warehouse needed to be close to roads or the canals for efficient importing and exporting of goods. Retailers needed to be conveniently clustered for the foot trade. In addition, buildings straddling the commercial and industrial districts were conveniently situated for the practice of a merchants’ exchange.

Syracuse’s Clinton and Hanover squares had many double-fronted buildings that straddled both the waterfront zone of warehousing and shipping and the street zone of pedestrian and wagon trade. After the 1819 re-platting of Syracuse in response to the coming canal, the layout focused on the Erie Canal as its “Main Street,” and buildings were designed to maximize both canal and street opportunities. Towpaths edging the canal provided a narrow buffer between building and water, and in cases of a canal turnout a wide, planked towpath doubled as dock and sidewalk. Lots stretching between canal and street presented the multiple advantage of tapping into varied vehicular access and thus could be divided into halves, with retailing along the street and warehousing, wholesaling, and shipping along the canal.
Central city proprietors constructed double-fronted buildings that capitalized on and delineated the distinctions between the two districts (Figs. 23, 25–27). Street facades featured large open fronts of display windows separated by stone or cast-iron piers, with evenly sized and spaced windows on the upper stories, an occasional hoist in the roof, and projecting cornices. Canal facades that fronted planked towpaths often followed a similar pattern of open fronts framed by sturdy piers, but, rather than being updated with larger, showier, and more vulnerable large plate glass, they presented plainer shop fronts of small-paned windows. At first glance the fenestration of the upper stories of the canal-fronted buildings replicated that of the retail side, but in place of the common three-bay window pattern was a staggered pattern of windows flanking an enlarged loading bay. Chutes often projected from these upper-story openings, and hoists and pulleys were built into the cornices. The warehouse stories were less heavily signed than retail fronts as well.62

Standing on the end of a row in Syracuse, the Journal Building actually presented three fronts, each expressively designated according to its function and audience. Hierarchies of finish expressed its different functions, audiences, and districts (Fig. 27). The Clinton Square facade featured a number of ornamental embellishments: a raised basement, pilasters, a corbeled cornice over a blind arcade, arched windows on the third story, and paired windows in the center bay. A separate staircase rose to the second-story printing offices, located above the higher-rent retail space at street level. It was, however, divided down the middle, reflecting the way in which this elevation acted as a hinge between its Water Street retail shops to the south and its Erie Canal warehouse to the north. Decorative features on the Water Street side of the facade were omitted on the canal side: the stringcourses were omitted, and the quoin-like pilaster at the corner did not wrap around to the canal side. The Water Street facade (unfortunately not visible in Fig. 27) probably featured the street-level pier and window pattern found on other retail buildings of the period. The Erie Canal side was simple, although being directly on Clinton Square made this facade part of the noticeable landscape, and so it received more detailing than canal-side fronts farther down the canal. A corbeled cornice wrapped around the street and canal sides, and the pattern of arched third-story windows was carried around as well. But neither pilasters nor expensive plate glass windows embellished the water side. Instead, signs of warehousing indicated the loading and unloading of goods. Hoists hung from the adjacent structure; barred windows and solid doors secured the contents. In fact, the ground
floor was used as the local police station in the early 1850s. Retail stores, a printing shop, a newspaper office, and a jail made for an unusual building type but one whose different functions were nonetheless architecturally differentiated. More important, the mixed-use Journal Building points to the variety of activities and people in the commercial center and the attempts to order them rationally through architecture.

The Appearances of Order

The prime aesthetic transformation of the cityscape during the second generation of city building was not simply the adoption of formal styles, although certainly Greek Revival and Italianate details cloaked the downtown. The widespread adoption of these styles was just one expression of a deeper aesthetic that valued uniformity over variety and order over license. Tidiness became a positive visual attribute. One of the greatest praises for the rebuilding of Hanover Square, for example, came from a resident who viewed the 1834 fire as a favor, “as it enabled the owners to rebuild more substantially and in greater uniformity.” Certainly, the Phoenix and Franklin buildings had much in common, with their brick construction, three- and four-story height, flush facades opened up by stone piers, and rhythmic fenestration with simple sills and lintels.

A taste for uniformity was evident in urban planning as well. In the debates about rebuilding the Salina Street bridge over the canal in 1833, a group of residents decried one proposal to widen it only toward the west. “Any departure from the centre will greatly mar the beauty and regularity of such street, as it will not be in line with the other bridge . . . and will in other respects have an unnatural and unpleasing appearance.” An 1851 Syracuse ordinance specifically stipulated that “it was in the permanent interests of [the] city” that newly added streets and squares must conform to the existing pattern both for public convenience and so that “uniformity may be produced.” Visual uniformity was not a by-product; it was a goal. It evinced a new appreciation by the city leadership for a more tidy and legible cityscape, one that preserved the commercial ethos of the mercantile city while nodding to the civic values of ordered public space. In the commercial city order and uniformity were equated with beauty.

A comparison of two views of Rochester’s Buffalo Street, one made by Basil Hall in 1827 and the other by Barber and Howe in 1841, charts the sorted city’s evolution from raw and snaggletoothed to refined and orderly (Figs. 8 and 16). The functional sorting is the same, but the architectural
refinement of the tableau is marked in the second-generation streetscape. Hall’s 1827 sketch focused on the contrasts between the commercial and civic districts. It captured the rather lackadaisical and indeterminate character of the commercial buildings, whose builders used close spacing and signs rather than building type or style to express their commercial purpose. No real sidewalks are evident, and the street itself is uneven. Even with the showy courthouse, the scene was ambivalent, both boasting the impressive urban achievements of only fifteen years and confessing that there remained much more to be done.

Barber and Howe’s 1841 engraving included the commercial and civic elision, but this time there was nothing about the view to suggest a disorderly pioneer settlement or tenuous commercial district. Looking eastward, Buffalo Street cut a broad, level swath through the center of the view. Nathaniel Rochester’s planned commercial and civic districts were still in place, although merchant storehouses had leapfrogged west of the courthouse and pressed eastward over the Buffalo Street bridge. The ramshackle commercial row in Hall’s view had been replaced by the monolithic Smith Block. A small grove of trees sandwiched between two temple-fronted offices buffered the courthouse from the busy street. Two-story, two-bay, gable-roofed frame buildings persisted, but brick, four-story, multiple-bayed, shed-roofed buildings dominated the streetscape. The new buildings initiated an urban wall of contiguous, same-height facades. The taste for spatial order extended to the public space of sidewalk and street. Store awnings presented a nearly continuous canopy along the north side of the street. Their braces regularly abutted the sidewalk edge as well as the facade height. Plank sidewalks of uniform width provided pedestrian walks and a buffer between street and building. All in all, the tidy prosperity of the second-generation streetscape evinced an order and uniformity lacking in Hall’s first-generation view. Admittedly, Barber and Howe’s generally boosterish publication simplified and sanitized the view of the city, but the regulating lines of uniform facades, awnings, and sidewalks were hardly an artist’s conceit. Factually and conceptually, the view captured the aesthetic ideal of ordered neatness that guided the remodeling of the commercial and civic districts. The tree-lined courthouse square provided a landscaped counterpoint to the hard architectural edge of the commercial district, but the two districts nonetheless shared the same underlying principles of clear, linear boundaries.

While architectural critics were urging merchants to invest in architectural improvements as their civic duty, merchants were passing regula-
tions that, ironically, restricted their own architectural liberties in their pursuit of an ordered streetscape. During this second generation, circa 1830s to 1850s, city authorities across the state began to restrict a businessman’s building and retailing practices if they intruded into the public space of the commercial district. They were not replacing commercial priorities with civic ones, but the rash of municipal ordinances regulating the appearances of public space showed a more nuanced process of intermingling of the two. Certainly, there were pragmatic issues at stake. As the commercial district grew larger, denser, and potentially more obstructed, local governments interceded to keep the streets and squares open and clear for the free movement of people and goods. The overflow of suspended signs and tumbling sidewalk displays impinged on the ease and efficiency of movement in the commercial district. But there was also a cultural aesthetic at work which now valued beauty in the form of visual order and even possibly the notion of the public’s, as opposed to the merchant’s, right to public space.

The authority of the local government did not extend to the actual design of private buildings. Yet at the plane of the street facade, the very nexus of public and private space, the city council acted on behalf of the public interest and intervened in a shopkeeper’s spatial practices. Nearly identical ordinances limited the extent of structural encroachments onto the sidewalks or streets by limiting the projections of “porch, stoop, cellar steps, cellar door, cellar way, or platform” to five feet on Rochester’s wide main streets and six feet on Syracuse’s main streets. Similar ordinances also controlled how much sidewalk space a shopkeeper could appropriate for commercial displays and trade. No “dry goods dealer, grocer, auctioneer, manufacturer or merchant, or any other shopman or dealer of any kind” was permitted to “place any goods, wares, merchandise, or other articles, in front of any store, shop or other building” farther than three feet in Rochester or six in Syracuse. Syracuse reduced it to four feet in 1857, indicating that sidewalk space was increasingly considered public, not private, space.

The regulations conceived of the commercial street not just in plan but in elevation as well. In Syracuse, stacked sidewalk displays could rise no higher than four feet. Signs were efficient means of selling and added to the visual legibility of the district’s commercial identity, yet they also were regulated as intrusions into the visual uniformity of the street. Both Syracuse and Rochester shopkeepers within the business district had to limit the projection of their signs or fixtures to two feet.

The regulations indicate motives beyond convenience, utility, and accessibility—specifically, a desire for uniformity for its own sake. The speci-
ficity of the details, down to the inch in some cases, allowed for very little variation in the architectural toolbox of building appurtenances. In both cities bow windows could not project more than fourteen inches. Rochester awnings must “be constructed in a uniform manner,” specifically seven feet high, rounded not squared, with a minimum diameter of five inches, and set in the ground flush with the outer edge of the sidewalk in line with the curb stone. In Syracuse awnings had to be at least seven feet above the sidewalk, with their posts aligned with the inside curb stones. This kind of uniformity worked hand in hand with the repetitive architectural styling to create a regular, even, ordered streetscape that celebrated its own comfortable aesthetic. The second generation of merchant city builders was listening to those architectural critics who called for business interests to lead the way in introducing architectural improvements to town planning. The spatial frame of the commercial district had been convincingly erected.

Architectural beauty and rational order had been imprinted on a static cityscape, but in reality the city never stood still. The perpetual motion of Rochester’s commercial district bombarded Nathaniel Hawthorne’s senses in 1832: “The whole street, sidewalks and centre, was crowded with pedestrians, horsemen, stage-coaches, gigs, light wagons, and heavy ox-teams, all hurrying, trotting, rattling, and rumbling, in a throng that continually passed, but never passed away. Here a country wife was selecting a churn, . . . there, a farmer was bartering his produce; and, in two or three places, a crowd of people were showering bids on a vociferous auctioneer. . . . At the ringing of a bell, judges, jurymen, lawyers, and clients, elbowed each other to the court-house. . . . In short, everybody seemed to be there, and all had something to do.” The merchants’ refinement of the commercial district did not stop with the physical cityscape but extended into the human landscape as well. Upon deeper investigation the people, activities, and sites that amazed Hawthorne were not jumbled within one indiscriminate public space of the commercial district but, rather, were part of a culturally scripted cityscape in action. Socially and spatially, people, too, were sorted out within the public space of the commercial district.