Toward a Genealogy of Downtown

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How do we sense a city? Is it a matter of directing our gaze from building to street to traffic to neon signs and back to the building again, accumulating impressions of line, scale, enclosure, mass, and spectacle, just as we do when viewing a painting of a landscape? No, the immediacy of our body’s movement through the city requires a different kind of gaze, one that filters and edits our impressions according to preestablished systems of knowledge. For those cities where we consider ourselves at home, the knowledge is different from what it is for cities where we are visiting for the first time. At home, we enjoy exquisitely detailed knowledge of streets, buildings, traffic, and neon, as well as the memory of past experiences in these locations. This familiar knowledge of places and practices employs the city as a canvas on which we live our lives. First-time visitors, in contrast, see the city initially as a mirror of received knowledge: the city as icon of a region, the city as site of history, the city as filled with identifiable monuments, the city as outlet for enjoying regional foods and drink, and so on. Each of these represents an artifact to be collected, consumed by the senses, and made material through postcards and bric-a-brac that can be exhibited to the folks at home as evidence of the transforming effects of travel. After spending some time among the locals, the visitor begins to see the city as a possibility for living a life beyond a hotel room and suitcase, a more difficult-to-communicate series of impressions that tend to fade rapidly. Of course, even visitors are rarely
without some previous experience in cities.

The global downtown, the focus of the chapters assembled in this volume, is a globalized, neoliberal variety of the new downtown. The new downtown is a redesign of the urban center, often sponsored and financed by corporate, rather than municipal, interests and employing design principles that simulate the features of imaginary cities without people. In this way, it is a refashioning of the morality of the urban community. It enters the experience of the knowers of the city as their bodies move through a city’s built environment. Redesigns of the urban center are not particular to the last forty years. They have a history that stretches back over 180 years. The whole concept of downtown qua downtown may be bound up with the process of redesign.

My goal here is not to write that history, but to excavate the layers of that experience. I hope to lay bare the artifacts that contribute to the experience of redesigned downtowns, so that what have been called the “new downtowns” can be seen in sharper relief.

In describing the genealogy that has led us to these new downtowns, I want to explore the common experiences of all who enter the downtown, regardless of their place of habitation. Such a project is possible even while acknowledging that people with different histories will experience some aspects of the city differently. All ages, classes, genders, ethnicities, and races experience the organized waiting that is a traffic jam, and its opposite, the joy of free-flowing circulation through city streets. How one expresses the waiting or the joy may vary from person to person, perhaps even group to group, but the ways in which the city inhibits movement and then releases it again levels social distinction. It is therefore appropriate to begin with movement.

_Latrocinium, with Apologies to Italo Calvino_

Recently, I reread Italo Calvino’s _Invisible Cities_ (Calvino 1978). The book describes fantastic cities framed by an extended conversation between a narrator named Marco Polo and an
interlocutor in the person of the aging emperor Kublai Khan. In that book, the narrator constructs and deconstructs fifty-five different ways of life in cities, each more fanciful than the next, all to the delight of the reader. I want to begin this unwrapping of the term *downtown* by imagining a city that Calvino did not describe. I call that city Latrocinium.

Kublai Khan asks Marco Polo what cities lie just beyond the borders of his empire. “Highness,” begins Marco Polo, “there is a most famous city entirely devoid of any buildings, walls, gardens, or towers. That city is called Latrocinium, the capital of the Esconian Empire. One approaches Latrocinium on a five-lane highway through a dessert. As one moves toward the city, the highway becomes increasingly crowded with vehicles of all sorts: wagons, chariots, dog carts, sport utility vehicles, semi-tracking trailers, circus wagons, rag top convertibles, and motor scooters. As one nears the actual city limits the traffic appears to stop. This is, in fact, an illusion. You are definitely moving, but only very slowly. The pace is so slow that you feel as if you are at a dead stop. You have truly entered Latrocinium.

The people of Latrocinium spend their days moving down this highway. It takes so much time to move around the city that they take pains to speak to each from their vehicles. To not do so would deprive them of one of the few opportunities for human contact. In this way, they form the same sorts of bonds one finds in the other cities I have described to you. However, in Latrocinium these bonds last only as long as the parallel lines of traffic progress at the same speed. In one of my visits, the line I was in suddenly accelerated, leaving behind a philosopher in the vehicle on my left with whom I was engaged in a conversation about the agency of the word, and a woman on my right with whom I was shamelessly flirting. Several minutes later, I found myself in an entirely
different neighborhood of Latrocinium, as the people in the vehicles around me were now strangers.

[In the interests of space, I will exclude from the account several paragraphs where Marco Polo tells Kublai Khan how children are schooled in Latrocinium, how people provision themselves without abandoning their vehicles, and how the people of Latrocinium bury their dead.]

After several months of moving down the road in this fashion, your vehicle suddenly begins to pick up speed. The vehicles around you are moving, too, but at different paces. Then, spaces begin to grow between the vehicles. It seems as if there is more road available. You accelerate. You are now leaving Latrocinium. You are among the few who chose the road that actually leads somewhere else.

This new Invisible Cities story raises the sort of questions that have troubled intellectuals working in cities since Vitruvius, the fourth-century Roman architect and planner. Are cities one social organization or many? Are cities primarily territorial entities of mortar and brick, steel and glass, inhabited by people, or are they constructs of the imagination that people then give material form?

I have found the culture concept a useful analytic for parsing such questions, especially when dealing with the unambiguously large, internally complex versions of urban settlements, the metropolises of the world. As an analytic, the culture concept directs our attention toward the socially acquired patterns within which people think, feel, and do, not the people themselves (Brumann 1999:23). Making generalizations about specific features of patterns within an aggregate, the city, is a different analysis task and a different rhetoric from making generalizations about the distinct-ness and qualities of an aggregate as a whole, culture of the
city. The former approach “does not require physical proximity or a specific type of Gemeinschaft ties, only social interaction, however (mass-) mediated and casual this may be—just seeing, hearing or reading of one another may suffice for mutual imitation” (Brumann 1999: 23). As ethnographers of Latrocinium culture, we can say nothing at all about the city as a city. However, we can say a great deal about the practice of making and breaking social relationships as the traffic speeds up and slows down. We might even be able to generalize about specific features of this interior relational practice. What goes for Latrocinium also goes for all those other social organizations in the contemporary world in which the flow of people, goods, ideas, and energy is the primary organizational feature shaping people’s lives.

The Barest Essentials: The Isolated City

If one were to strip away the asphalt, cement, bricks, and mortar of cities, what would be left of urban life? The first principles of the urban are to be found in what is known as primitive trade. First identified by Karl Polanyi (1975) and elaborated by Conrad M. Arensberg, Harry W. Pearson (Polanyi, Arensberg, and Pearson 1957), and Marshall Sahlins (1972), primitive trade is balanced reciprocity between strangers where the goal of the exchange is the satisfaction of want, rather than the maintenance of social relations. This form of trade is contrasted with social exchanges of “gifts” where the ongoing social relations dwarf the values of the object exchanged. In trade, surpluses of goods and services in one location are exchanged to meet desires that cannot be satisfied adequately through production in another location. Because it takes place between relative strangers, that is, people who do not have sustained ties with each other, such trade is conducted in places outside the settlements of the actors involved. The resulting markets, fairs, and bazaars can be temporary, periodic, seasonal, or permanent. The
longer they exist in the same place, the more often ancillary and opportunistic activities will co-occur in that place. This intersection of exchange among strangers in specific times and places is the one activity that is consistent across all urban experiences. Whatever co-occurs, such as ritual, administration, military, transportation, or production, gives this intersection its uniqueness, what Calvino might call its visibility. However, it is the exchange activity that gives rise to the phenomenon of the central place.

Central place is the name of the location where strangers assemble to trade. People’s use of land was shown by Johan Heinrich Thünen in 1826 to be a function of the exchange value for agricultural surplus production and the distance to the place of exchange, thereby establishing the importance of the calculation of marginal cost in people’s lives (1966). For producers in a region where places of exchange compete with each other, the desire to reduce this marginal cost and enjoy higher prices in exchange is a strong one. This must compete with population growth, which forces people to move away from each other and toward unused space to meet their basic needs. Over time, new places of exchange and transportation links are established. As the region fills with central places, people in the different locations begin to compete with each other to provide more specialized exchanges, the ones people desire most but purchase less often and are therefore willing to spend more time, effort, and treasure to attain. Every good, every service has a threshold where consumers will no longer move to exchange for it (Stine 1962). Out of this, Walter Christaller noted in 1933, a hierarchical system of central places develops, each level of the hierarchy marked by increases in specialization in the goods and services available for trade (1966; Lösch 1954). These principles apply to periodic markets (Skinner 1964), although some reflect these locational effects less clearly than others (Bromley 1974), as well as to towns and cities. Important exceptions to the hierarchy of central places are observable in cities and towns.
that follow the rank-size rule: the higher the center is in the hierarchy, the larger its size. This rule was elaborated by Brian J. L. Berry in 1971 to show that growth actually trickles down through the hierarchy from central city to suburb except when political processes intervene to distort this hierarchy (Berry 1971). Distorted hierarchies and uneven growth are more the norm than what he expected when he attempted to test the rank-size principle in real regions. The very highest nodes in the hierarchy are also places of great economic and political power. This power is used to restrict the growth of secondary and tertiary places to ensure that the metropolis, or primate city, will receive the greatest share of growth, wealth, and cultural prominence (Rotenberg 1979; Mera 1973).

William Cronon identifies the river as the natural feature that promoted Chicago as a central place. It provided a sheltered harbor for canoes, and later sailing ships, a passage from the lake to the interior prairie, and a boundary between open and flowing waters. With the Calumet portage a few miles to the south, the river was a gateway to the Mississippi watershed and trade routes throughout North America. This feature reduced marginal costs for every commodity that passed through it. It was this favorable transportation position that grabbed the attention of the market agents after 1833. They convinced investors that this site was a unique candidate for a central place that would quickly ascend the regional hierarchy, bringing the value of property along with it. Even after the first speculative boom collapsed in 1837, the site’s transportation advantages sustained market development disproportionate to all but a few other central places in all of North America (Cronon 1991: 23–41).

Stripped of its streets and buildings, the urban place is a central place, a place of exchange. As we add back the built features through which we identify cities, we are still seeing a place of exchange. Where, when, and whom to include and exclude from the exchange
practices are the reason for the city to exist. Without that place of exchange, the very absence of which makes Latrocinium so disconcerting, the city cannot be seen.

Enter the Downtown: The Legacy of Burnham and Burgess

Neither Daniel Burnham, author of the plan for Chicago, nor Ernest Burgess, author of the seminal chapter of urban growth and development in Robert E. Park, Burgess, and Roderick Duncan McKenzie’s canonical Chicago School text, *The City* (1925), invented the idea of the downtown, the central business district. The continued popularity of this book contributed to distributing the idea among several generations of designers and planners. The liminality of the center, the *axis mundi*, is an idea as old as settled communities. However, both Burnham and Burgess gave it shape in ways that permitted powerful institutions to focus on it as a place of control. Nor were they operating in an intellectual vacuum. European urban restructuring of the downtown had been ongoing since the 1830s. What these fin de siècle modernists did was to brand the center for the planners and designers who followed them. The two were of different generations and never met, though they walked the same streets and were inspired by the lake-river city of Chicago for many years.

At the time when Burnham was developing his plans, the discourse on shaping the downtown to serve the powerful was dominated by two nineteenth-century planning regimes: the archaic school championed by Camillo Sitte, which designs a downtown as a holistic aesthetic with far-reaching sensory and psychological effects, and the modern school championed by Otto Wagner, which plans the downtown as an engineering problem of moving people and goods safely, hygienically, and without risk of fire (Rotenberg 1995: 161–66). Burnham’s plan for Chicago chose to privilege traffic flows over psychological comfort, remaining firmly within the
modernist regime. It demanded a center to the web of streets, though the actual shape of that center itself can vary from a rectilinear to the radial grid. Paris (rectilinear) and Vienna (radial) provided two different models of how the center of established cities could be reconfigured for modern traffic flows, retail trade, and commercial real estate markets.

Burnham took the traditions of the nineteenth-century urban design visionaries and the Beaux Arts neoclassical design aesthetics of the school and produced a master plan for Chicago. That plan, published in 1909, allowed for almost infinite growth while retaining the City Beautiful Movement’s sense of grandeur and metropolitan self-consciousness that previously has been enjoyed only by the imperial metropoles of Europe. In sumptuous watercolor renderings, Burnham portrayed a city as if in the civil twilight of a new dawn. The shining beacon of light is located in an arbitrary place on the grid, near the river and the lakefront. This privileged place would become known as the downtown. The influences were readily apparent: Baron Haussmann for the radiating boulevards, Ebenezer Howard for the outer ring, Frederick Law Olmsted for the integrated park system, Charles McKim and Louis Sullivan for the water elements and the neoclassical simplicity in the sightlines, and Maxfield Parrish for the color palette. Yet of all the features, the system of circles radiating from a center of a rectilinear grid, like a stone tossed in a placid lake, is the prominent feature of the plan. These increasingly brighter circles are not evident in Burnham’s plan for San Francisco. There are more “circles on squares” in his plan for Manila, completed one year earlier. Starting with Manila and Chicago, Burnham would employ the style of illuminating the center of his cities with this bright light of color. This modern regime unfolded globally. It is first enacted in the metropol and later in the colonial capitals.¹

These “circles on squares” are important in leading Burgess to think about the growth and...
social development of Chicago. Written in 1925, fifteen years after the publication of Burnham’s plan and its wide dissemination under the patronage of the Commercial Club of Chicago, Burgess’s chapter is local in its vision, global in its impact. Park, McKenzie, and Louis Wirth, the other three authors of the book’s chapters, were more directly concerned with the social organization of specific groupings in the city. It was Burgess who focused on the space and its places. Even his metaphor for urban growth, urban ecology, was taken from nineteenth-century notions of the spatialization of animal and plant communities in nature. He was not putting the people of Chicago into Burnham’s plan. He was putting Burnham’s plan on the people of Chicago.

For Burgess the boundary between any two circles was both cultural (native vs. newly arrived) and class-based (roomers vs. workingmen’s residences), both of which were the sources of social pathologies. Both Burgess and Park believed that the morality of communities depended upon the emergence of a set of communal rules of belief and conduct that bind individual behaviors. Social pathologies result from the breakdown of those sets of beliefs because of residential instability, low wages, and disease, with the personal and property crimes that attend to these conditions. When the rules are not in place to blunt competitive and individualist instincts, urban life is dangerous and ugly. As one moves from the center to the edge of the city, according to Burgess, each zone in space represents a distinct zone of increasing moral order, the highest of which are the residential and commuter zones. The city is a matrix of different moral communities, each identified by its class standing, relative nativity, and economic stability. The downtown was where all the communities mix. It was a place made simultaneously visible and invisible. It is made visible by the surveillance of governmental authority to insure against the outbreaks of lawlessness from the culture clashes of contrasting moral communities.
neighborhoods immediately surrounding it.

The writings of the Chicago School (officially known as the Local Community Research Committee) were not the idle jottings of philosophers speaking and listening only to themselves. This was an academic enterprise whose proponents populated the government offices and academic departments throughout North America, inventing several traditions for imagining, naming, and evaluating the twentieth-century urban experience throughout the world. The most durable of these traditions would prove to be the imaginary of the downtown.

The missing element in Burgess is the economic basis for the regional role of newly emergent urban forms. Sociogenic forces such as class and ethnicity will distort Christaller’s regular system of central places for a time, but these forces cannot prevail in the long run. The practice of seeking lower marginal costs in exchanges will always produce some place as the most complex node in a system of market nodes in the region. By complex market node, I mean the location where the provision of goods and services includes frequently accessed outlets, less frequently accessed outlets, and rarely accessed outlets, all in one place—in other words, a location where a pharmacy, a green grocer, a bank, a stationery store, a store selling fur coats, a store catering to coin collectors, and a boutique in which the least expensive frock is $3,000 all occupy the same block. This highest node must always exist in a region as a statistical artifact, if not as a well-defined spatial brand. Burgess focused on the branding of the place, not on the practical reason that led to its existence.

<Simulacrum: Florida and Ford

The transportation revolution, which for North America began in the period after the American Civil War, is primarily responsible for the creation of a downtown population that changes its
composition between day and night. The alternating rhythm of the use of space is entirely modern in its origins. The European tradition of municipal lock laws ensured that their downtowns would be deserted after the theaters let out. We take for granted the idea that work and home should be separated today, but this was not the case before the second half of the nineteenth century. Such a separation would have been impossible without cheap and available transportation. The location of the wage job is no different from the location of any other exchange. As long as the marginal cost is too high, one will forgo the job in the central business district in favor of one closer to home. When transportation technology lowers that cost, greater distances can separate families and their wage employments. The choice of where to work and where to live can be separated much more easily than was ever the case historically. Adding ease of transportation onto the modernist design regime results in a flow of people back and forth from the center of the grid to its outskirts every workday. The downtown benefits by becoming a transportation node equal in importance to its role in the central place hierarchy. The population of wage earners mixes with shoppers during the day, while at night people who live in or near the central business district stroll these same boulevards.

Who, then, can be said to inhabit the downtown? Who are indigenous to the district? The quick answer is both the commuters and the nearby residents. Richard Florida has recently offered a more complex answer to this question. Instead of the orthogenetic growth of urban regions that I have emphasized in the discussion of Burgess’s locational practices, Florida takes a heterogenetic approach: the development of an open, tolerant cultural environment combines with the locational decisions based on marginal costs to boost some nodes in a region to greater growth. Florida is writing in the tradition of the human capital school of regional growth. Robert E. Lucas sums up the core principle of this school as follows:
If we postulate only the usual list of economic forces, cities should fly apart. The theory of production contains nothing to hold a city together. A city is simply a collection of factors of production—capital, people, land—and land is always far cheaper outside cities than inside... It seems to me that the force we need to postulate to account for the central role of cities in economic life is of exactly the same character as the external human capital... What can people be paying Manhattan or downtown Chicago rents for, if not for being near other people. (Lucas 1988: 38–39, cited in Florida 2005: 32 with ellipsis).

Edward L. Glaeser has shown that agglomeration, a feature of the older orthogenetic locational economics that accounts for the clustering of firms to take advantage of networks of suppliers or customers, is actually better explained by the advantages of locating around a common labor pool (1998). Florida expands on this view, showing that labor itself clusters because of the co-availability of technology (such as transportation, but also technological innovations), talent (such as his Bohemian Index, measuring the density of artists), and tolerance (such as his Melting Pot Index, measuring density of foreign-born, and his Gay Index, measuring the density of gay couples) (Florida 2005).

Burgess was not oblivious to the argument Florida wants to make, though he does so through his bourgeois lens. He locates a group he calls “Bohemians” just outside the central business district as part of an urban “underworld.” If one lays Burgess’s schematic in Figure 4 on a real map of Chicago, the part of the city under the term underworld falls directly over the River North location of the Tree Studios, less than one mile north of the Loop. This was a late nineteenth-century application of Florida’s thesis: a half city block of studios built in 1884 by a prominent statesman and judge to retain the artists and sculptors who had contributed to the
Columbian Exposition, and thereby to boost the reputation of Chicago as a center of artistic production. Lambert Tree built the studios behind the stables in his own backyard. Having served as U.S. ambassador to France, Tree realized that the presence of working artists gave a city stature. This was not a case of “build it and they will come.” **Those in the creative class were already in the region.** They had come because of the commissions available for this temporary, disposable project of the Columbian World Exposition. They would ordinarily disperse to other projects because there was nothing in the Chicago of the time to hold them there. This was a case of “build it and they will stay.” And stay they did. By the 1920s, the area around Tree Studios was a vibrant bohemian colony, the older gentry residences having been leveled to make way for commercial and multi-family buildings. For Burgess, the district was the quintessential underworld, in the older, pre-Elliot Ness sense, a social sphere below the level of ordinary life inhabited by people of questionable respectability. From their location just outside the downtown, the Bohemians were able to set up a counter-world of possibility. Much the same role was played by Greenwich Village in New York City. It was the counter-world to Gotham, the strip between Washington Square Park and Forty-Second Street that through much of the twentieth century was arguably the most diverse, talented, and technologically significant place in North America, if not the world.

The human capital school uses indices that locate the creative class in standard metropolitan statistical areas and census tracks, rather than specific places, like Tree Studios.

This is not location in the same sense as Christaller’s central places. For this reason, the creative class cannot be associated with the downtown today anymore than it could in Burgess’s day.

Instead, a high score on the Creativity Index, Florida’s composite of the various indices he devised, contributes to the city’s brand without really inhabiting a specific district. That visitors
to New York City, Boston’s Route 128 Corridor, or Silicone Valley will rarely encounter any specific place of creativity is irrelevant to the power of the presence of creative people in a technologically sophisticated and socially tolerant setting, and the products these residents contribute to the market. The formula for integrating the avant garde into the economy has always been Cultural Capital plus Commoditization equals Money.

Florida is convincing when arguing that a strong and vital creative class and the economic growth of a city are correlated. In what way could the first cause the second? Here we enter the realm of symbolic economies, notably the relationship between representations of value and the social exchange matrix in which those representations are currency. The competition among cities for new capital and the enhancement of economic growth that follows is a tournament of value, an auction in which the highest investments are made in locations that offer the most "value." Among the intangible elements that contribute to the evaluation of a location’s "value" are the available amenities or symbolic assets that accrue to the investor through the location. Constructing these amenities is shared among artists, performers, and designers, but also among architects, sports franchises, civil engineers, local charitable foundations, and even the Department of Streets and Sanitation. Each has a role to play in the representation of the city that will be in play during the auction for investors.

The city that these investors are “consuming” is a simulacrum, a perfect copy (in their minds) of a city that never existed, except in small, local, and fleeting instances. Yes, there was a moment after World War II, for example, when painters, poets, and musicians found common cause with each other, as well as common residence in Greenwich Village, and in so doing created a Zeitgeist and a durable and saleable image of the New York avant garde. Then, it was gone, commoditized into galleries, bookstores, and music stores. There was a time when Steve
Jobs and Steve Wozniak made computers in their garage, instantiating the durable and saleable image of the Nerdopolis (Florida’s term) of Silicon Valley. Then, it was gone, commoditized into Apple, Inc. The investors who came later, looking for lightning to strike twice in the same place, were investing in a simulacrum.

Nowhere in the city are the signs that reference this representation denser than in the downtown. To display them in the artists’ quarter would be to undermine the signs of decay and seediness that establish the authenticity of the avant garde. Even the corner store selling postcards with the likenesses of the district’s most famous residents must be requisite derelict.

No other district will afford as many eyes on the signs as the downtown, its very density supported by the commingling of workers and shoppers. It is the downtown that must carry the symbolic assets of the city, including those of the creative class. That presents a very interesting problem to planners. The downtown already has its preestablished set of symbolic assets. They exist in the local imagination as never quite fulfilling their promise as the city’s front room. This is because familiarity and the myth-building powers of simulacra are mutually destructive. The indigenous build resentment toward their downtown, just as the city’s economic development office stocks the district to the brim with representations of the “value” the city has to offer.

The locals develop a mythology of their own about the downtown, fueled by the commonsense-producing distributions of newspapers and local media. Larry R. Ford debunks these myths, so I will not do so again. I include his concise list here for the resonances they produce in the discourse on downtowns:

1. <NL>Downtowns have become ugly, sterile and culturally distant. (They used to be beautiful and highly symbolic.)

2. American downtowns are ragged, ever-changing, always under construction. (They were
once stable, finished, and orderly.)

3. Downtowns have been privatized into fortress-like spaces that exclude much of the populace. (They were once full of more egalitarian public space.)

4. Downtowns have become superficial, inauthentic, and homogeneous. (They once had a strong sense of place resulting from local economic traditions and architecture.)

5. Downtowns are dangerous, crime-filled places, especially at night. (They used to be safe, law-abiding and full of nightlife.)

6. Downtowns are physically and psychologically distant—they are poorly served by public transit and parking is expensive and unavailable. (Everyone used to go downtown easily and cheaply on the bus or trolley.)

7. In the age of office parks and malls downtowns have become so much like suburban developments that there is no point going there. (Downtowns used to be unique; there was nothing like going downtown.)

8. Downtowns rely on the exploitation of low-paid “post-Fordist” labor. (They used to rely on a well-paid and well-trained working class.)

9. No one lives downtown; it is not a twenty-four-hour place. (The downtown once had a large, middle-class residential population.)

10. Downtowns are expensive toys built primarily for tourists and visitors. (They used to better meet the needs of ordinary city residents.)

11. Downtowns are polluted and dirty, especially compared to the green and spacious suburbs (Downtowns used to be clean and tidy.)

12. Downtowns are crowded and congested compared to the spacious suburbs. (Downtown density was once manageable, but with the advent of cars and trucks, congestion is out of
One might reasonably assume that the first statement in each of these tropes would be the local view, while the second, parenthetical statement would belong both to the sentimentally nostalgic local resident and to the economic developer. Move each of those second statements to the present or future tense, and they provide the basis for a development campaign aimed at seeking outside investment. The bridging logic between the past, the present, and the future is the existence of a large and vital creative class.

**The Invisibility of the New Downtowns**

We need to probe deeper into the negativity at the base of this discourse. Why are people willing to believe negative imagery and narratives about downtowns? The reason must lie with people’s experience of these districts. The imprecise boundaries of the old downtown, its associations with the cultural devalorization documented by Ford, and the anonymity of the new downtown that replaces it are all retained in the memory of the direct experience of urban space. This experience has not been a particularly satisfying one for reasons that may be surprising.

The urban field is crowded with spaces of various kinds. Scholars have catalogued these for the last half-century, beginning with Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1966) and Henri Lefebvre (1992), and continuing to (1984) and (1995). To begin, we experience space differently from place. Place is a location of elements that we find meaningful. It might be an address, a park, a battlefield, an office building where we work, or a beach we go to in our minds when we want a little peace and quiet. Place does not have to be real. In fact, the most satisfying places combine elements of real locations with imaginary ones. Place is difficult to manufacture. It is the stuff of history, memory, and mythology. One experiences place through memory, narrative, and monument. One becomes attached to places emotionally or intellectually through associations...
that one builds in the mind between memories, narratives, and monuments.

The Greek word *topos*, place, is used as the root to describe various anomalous combinations of real and imaginary places that depart in some way from our ordinary experience of place. *Utopia*, literally “no place,” is a literary genre for imagining a society that works in some more satisfying fashion than the writer’s own. *Dystopia*, on the other hand, is a “sick place,” where things work in a far less satisfying way. *Heterotopia*, a term coined by Michel Foucault, refers to places that take on very special meanings for people, especially if those meanings are associated with powerful institutions, relationships, or cosmologies (Foucault 1986; Rotenberg 1995). Augé, following an analysis by de Certeau, has recently described a fourth anomaly, the non-place, or what I shall call the *atopia*. An atopia designates two complementary but distinct realities: spaces formed in relation to certain specific urban activities, usually transport, transit, commerce, and leisure, and the relations that individuals have with these spaces (Augé 1995: 94). We cannot call a public transit bus a place in any meaningful way. One bus is very much like another. Something meaningful can happen to a person on a bus that might be the basis for place making, but that particular bus, its number, its peculiarities among other buses, will not be part of the memory. As for the other people on the bus, their relationship to each other is the same as their relationship to the activity they are engaged in. They are solitary and anonymous. The bus is an urban atopia, a non-place.

Space is experienced through the movement of body. Space is produced as one moves from place to place. One frequents a space, intersects with other moving bodies, and transforms space into lived experience. Take a street, any street. The street is there because someone decided it would be a good place to build a street. It probably is not a mere paving of an old cow path, as many residents of older cities might believe. It is a place in the mind of planners,
engineers, residents, and merchants. Only when people move through the street does it become a space.

A bus has the characteristics of a space. One moves on a bus, even as the bus moves through the streets from place to place (bus stop to bus stop). In his analysis of this movement, Augé notes that the stops of the Paris metro inevitably reference monuments and historic districts of one sort or another, in other words, places. This is one of the features of atopias that make them interesting to think about. They have the same role as ordinary places in the production of urban space even though they are devoid of the embedded social relations of places. They are nonplaces because the only relationship possible is a contractual one (you bought a ticket, right?) focused on the activity at hand.

The specific urban activities that are likely to engender atopic spaces are transport (airports, train stations, intercity bus terminals), transit (taxis, automobiles, buses, subways, escalators), commerce (of the chain store, franchise restaurant, mall outlet variety), and leisure (the theme park, urban attraction, “must see” vista, or staged festival). These have their parallels in ordinary spaces: the shared ride using the personal autos of each rider in rotation, the corner “mom and pop” grocery where names and greetings are exchanged with each transaction, and the regular Saturday morning chess game in the park with the same three people for the last five years, weather permitting. Not only are the former contractual and solitary, while the latter are consensual and social; the scales of the atopic spaces are large enough to accommodate many more people.

The new downtown, the subject of the analyses in this book, is a collection of atopic spaces. These districts will always be a palimpsest, a reconstruction of a space scraped of its previous buildings, associations with memory, and human relations. The erasure is never
complete. Augé describes the echo of the lost places as follows:

The town center is an active place. At regular weekly intervals, on Sunday or Market Day, the center “comes to life.” The new towns produced by technicist and voluntarist urbanization projects have often been criticized for failing to offer “places for living”, equivalent to those produced by an older, slower history: where individual itineraries can intersect and mingle, where a few words are exchanged and solitudes momentarily forgotten, on church steps, in front of the town hall, at the café counter or in a baker’s doorway: the rather lazy rhythm and talkative mood that still characterizes Sunday mornings in contemporary provincial France (Augé 1995: 66).

The old district remains in the memories, histories, and narratives of the residents; the new one is unable to complete itself because the place it occupies is never fully emptied of its former relations. Instead, like a bus, the new center succeeds only as solitary, contractual atopia.

To frequent space, de Certeau writes, is “to repeat the gleeful and silent experience of infancy: to be other, to go over to the other, in a place” (Certeau 1984: 164). This is not possible in the new downtowns. As we move through the space that connects non-places, we catch glimpses of a landscape whose features are so homogeneous that we lose track of what city we are in. We feel we ought to look at something, even if it is the one variation in the architecture that is not consistent with every other outlet or franchise of this corporation all over the world.

There is nothing to see. Yet, we are forced to take a position toward the landscape, a point of view, or lose any possibility of pleasure.

The new downtown is invoked through words, or more precisely, through clichés, rather than through sights. We are offered texts, rather than memories. We are guided with instructions, rather than relationships. Spaces offer messages that inform us about the permissible activities
that each is prepared to contain. In ordinary spaces, we read the semiotics of the space by observing the people who are already in the space. The messages of atopia are written on the walls. There is no response possible, no conversation. One remains alone walking in the space because one need not interact to know how to use the space. Information, prescriptions, and prohibitions are well signed and paths are clearly lighted: “enter here,” “place order here,” “pay here,” and “validate ticket before returning to vehicle.”

Ordinary spaces are formed out of people relating to other people through the construction and negotiation social identities. Even strangers passing on the street, whether they indicate each other’s presence or not, read each other and form a silent, momentary relationship. Where multiple interactions are commonplace, the algorithms of conversation and references to shared experience combine to produce more individualized identities. In atopic spaces, each has the same identity: passenger, cashier, customer, driver. This temporary anonymity has its positive side. It can be felt as liberating. The judgments of role performance are suspended. One need only be told where to go, how to get there, and what to avoid. In the atopia, one is alone, but so is everyone else. The only aspect of the experience that connects one to the other is that each has made the same contract: holding the ticket, queuing for the bus, waiting to be seated, or staking out blanket space at the free concert. The old bonds that attach people to their social selves are relieved. In their place, one experiences what Augé calls “the passive joys of identity-loss, and the more active pleasure of role playing…. What he is confronted with, finally, is an image of himself, but in truth it is a pretty strange image. The only face to be seen, the only voice to be heard, in the silent dialogue he holds with the landscape-text addressed to him along with others, are his own: the face and voice of a solitude made all the more baffling by the fact that it echoes millions of others” (1995: 103). Whenever one goes to look at a new downtown, one
finds oneself. It is in this sense, then, that the center is rendered invisible. We have entered Latrocinium.

**Toward a Genealogy**

A genealogy is warranted whenever we feel ourselves lacking a history. The genealogy is not a search for origins. Nor is it the narration of a constructed sequence. Instead, according to Foucault, it reveals the traces of a plural and sometimes contradictory past through which power has influenced truth (1977). In the preceding discussion I have tried to uncover the artifacts that contribute to our experience of downtowns to put the new downtowns in sharper relief. In particular, I explored the common experiences of all who experience the downtown, regardless of their place of habitation.

The earliest layer of the common experiences is the movement of body through the space that will eventually be filled with places. The first of these places to be established is the one that locates the practice of trade among strangers. Its spatial outcome is the central place. This central place is the first instance of what will eventually be called the downtown. The downtown was where different moral communities, each identified by its class standing, relative nativity, and economic stability, mix. The surveillance by governmental authority mitigates conflicts from the clashes among these communities, a surveillance that is acutely felt in the downtown where high-end retail outlets, often the targets of thieves, are concentrated. It is simultaneously a transportation hub, disgorging and swallowing workday commuters, tourists, and migrants. They mix with permanent residents who pay premium rents for the opportunity to be with others with similar cultural capital, whether bohemian or bourgeois. And it is the bourgeois who keep the bohemians close, ensuring access to an avant garde market in which commodities carry extraordinary social distinction. Nowhere are the signs of social distinction denser than in the...
downtown, culminating in contradictory expectations for downtowns that are never fully realized. For the city’s boosters, the aim is to stock the district to the brim with representations of the “value” the city has to offer. For the residents, an alternative mythology builds that sees the district as “ugly, sterile and culturally distant.”

Conceived by the modernist grandchildren of Burnham, these new downtowns have become “so much like suburban developments that there is no point going there.” In the popular imaginary, what was once a communal front parlor filled with memories of family, fraternity, and familiarity has become alien, anonymous, and atopic. Where once we were conjoined, now we are isolated. It is an alternative morality, a space in which our movements are anticipated and narrated for us. Indeed, we cannot move off from the proffered path; entry is not authorized. The old downtown that lies beneath, the movement of body through space to trade among strangers, is fully present but now transformed. Rather than being filled with places of real memory, real experience, and sustained relationships among strangers, the new downtown constructs its places out of an imagined memory, simulated experiences, and temporary relationships between strangers. Such downtowns are truly new. They are also on the verge of collapsing under the weight of their contradictions. These are not the first experiments in designed spaces. We can relate them to mid-twentieth-century public housing, itself another example of spatial truths distorted by power, another designed morality. Like public housing, new downtowns will eventually be abandoned, torn down, or transformed into spaces that do respond to real practices.

This will happen when the appeal of the trade in goods they offer no longer attracts the curious or the affluent. Indeed, it may already have begun.

Chapter 1. Toward a Genealogy of Downtowns
See http://www.essential-architecture.com/ARCHITECT/ARCH-Burnham.htm for images of these plans.