

ONE

Introduction

Death Corner

Make no little plans.

—Daniel H. Burnham¹

In June, 1996, when Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley announced the \$1 billion Near North Redevelopment Initiative, the neighborhood he targeted for help—the northwest corner of the city’s Near North Side—was one of the most troubled in the city.² Just across the river from the downtown Loop, a few blocks west of North Michigan Avenue, and a stone’s throw south of Lincoln Park, it was tantalizingly close to the booming Chicago of the 1990s. But proximity to wealth and power had not helped this place much. Dominated by a “notorious” public housing complex called Cabrini Green, it was home to several thousand very poor, mostly female-headed, African-American families, who struggled there amid not only extreme poverty and racial isolation but also near universal unemployment, acute school failure, rampant drug and alcohol abuse, violent crime, and physical blight. Indeed, for most Chicagoans, inured to their city’s cold social logic, these families had *caused* the neighborhood’s problems; and their removal, clearly foreseen by the mayor’s plan, was the first step in its transformation.

In fact, the neighborhood had been troubled long before there was a housing project here. From the start of nonnative settlement in the region, the western half of the north bank of the Chicago River was associated with industrial and other low-rent uses.³ By the middle of the nineteenth century, it had become the city’s main port of entry for European immigrants, its cheap wooden houses and proximity to blue-collar work attracting successive waves of Irish and German workingmen. In time, the Germans prospered and moved farther north; but many of the Irish stayed, putting up brick structures on their

lots and moving the old wooden-frame houses to the back to be rented to even poorer immigrants, including, in the 1870s and '80s, large numbers of Swedes.⁴ Later, Italians would settle here; and, by 1915, a veritable "Little Sicily" had sprung up along West Division Street.

The eastern half of the north bank, meanwhile, had become the most fashionable address in Chicago. After Potter and Bertha Palmer, the city's real estate king and society queen, moved here in 1882, the center of Chicago wealth gradually shifted from Prairie Avenue on the Near South Side to this northeastern corner of the Near North Side. Soon, the neighborhood had so many mansions it was called the "Gold Coast"; and, by the 1920s, Lake Shore Drive was home to more wealth than any other street in the world, save Fifth Avenue.⁵

Thus it was that in the early decades of the twentieth century the richest and poorest neighborhoods in Chicago were literally within hailing distance of each other. In his 1929 book *The Gold Coast and the Slum*, University of Chicago sociologist Harvey Zorbaugh described the district as a place of extremes: "The Near North Side is an area of high light and shadow, of vivid contrasts—contrasts not only between the old and the new, between the native and the foreign, but between wealth and poverty, vice and respectability, the conventional and the bohemian, luxury and toil" (4). It was a contrast he found unhealthy: "The isolation of the populations crowded together within these few hundred blocks, the superficiality and externality of their contacts, the social distances that separate them . . . the inevitable result is cultural disorganization" (16).

Zorbaugh's "slum"—encompassing the lodging houses along Clark and Wells Streets and south of Chicago Avenue as well as the vast neighborhood of tenement houses stretching from Wells to the North Branch of the Chicago River—had the highest concentration of poverty in the city (5). It was also extremely cosmopolitan, with a half dozen "foreign" colonies existing side by side and "more grades of people" living together than anywhere else in the city (11–12, 140ff). The section from Sedgwick Street west to the river and from Chicago Avenue north to Division, for example, was dominated by Italians and centered on the St. Philip Benizi church at Oak and Cambridge Streets (159ff).⁶ Nearby was Jenner School ("our school," the Italians called it), and along West Division Street were Italian grocery stores, markets, cobblers, and macaroni factories. From 1900 to 1916, writes Zorbaugh, the neighborhood was virtually untouched by American customs: it recorded little or no political participation and was controlled largely by the families who lived there (175). What it was best known for, however, was crime: the corner of Oak and Cambridge Streets was the scene of so much violence it was called "Death Corner" (171).⁷ Especially worrisome were the high rates of juvenile delinquency here; every boy in Little Sicily, Zorbaugh wrote, was a member of a gang (177).⁸

The other principal subdivision of the Near North slum was the “Negro” section (147ff). African-Americans began trickling up to the “Lower North” from the city’s South Side during and right after World War I, when the “Great Migration” of southern blacks put extreme pressure on the city’s black belt. The newcomers settled first along Wells and Franklin Streets but then began pushing westward into Little Sicily. More blacks would settle here in the 1920s; by the end of that decade, they would account for a fifth of the neighborhood’s population.⁹

Italian parents complained about the presence of black children in neighborhood schools and playgrounds; and some white property owners, Zorbaugh reports, tried to prevent blacks from acquiring property in the area (148).¹⁰ But, on the whole, the coming of blacks to the Italian Near North Side was relatively peaceful: perhaps because the number of blacks was not at first very large or because the two groups were equally destitute or because Italians got along better with blacks than other immigrant groups did.¹¹ However it transpired, by 1929, a black population of several thousand had settled on the Near North Side, bringing with them their barber shops, pool halls, corner markets, and storefront churches (149).

In the following years, there were few changes in “North Town”: neither the population nor the racial composition of the neighborhood underwent any significant alteration, staying around 80 percent white and 20 percent black. But because there was so little construction here during these years—only 221 new housing units were built in the entire city in 1932¹²—the already intolerable housing conditions in the area deteriorated further. In 1939, the *WPA Guide to Illinois* described a neighborhood of “desolate tenements and shacks” inhabited by “Italians and Negroes.”¹³ And a government study from the time found that, of 683 housing units surveyed here, 50 percent were wooden-framed, most had been built soon after the 1871 fire, 443 had no bath tub, 480 had no hot water, and 550 were heated only by stoves. Forty-three toilets were shared by two families each; for the rest, there were twenty-nine yard toilets and ten under the sidewalks.¹⁴

The Rise of Cabrini Green

It was here, in 1941, on sixteen acres of cleared slum-land in the heart of Little Sicily, that the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) began construction of the Frances Cabrini Homes, a federally funded housing project comprised of forty-five two- and three-story red-brick row houses with 586 units of subsidized housing.¹⁵ The project was named for St. Frances Xavier Cabrini (1850–1917), the first U.S. citizen to be canonized by the Roman Catholic Church and a beloved figure in Little Sicily.¹⁶ When the Cabrini Homes opened in 1942, the

CHA was only five years old, having been created soon after the passage of the 1937 U.S. Housing Act, which provided federal funds to state-chartered municipal corporations for job creation, slum clearance, and housing construction for the poor. An earlier federal program, administered by the Housing Division of the Public Works Administration, had built four housing projects in Chicago in the mid- to late 1930s: three in white neighborhoods and one in the black belt.¹⁷

The Cabrini row houses were laid out barracks style, the average unit containing four bedrooms and renting for about \$30 per month. During construction, which coincided with the entrance of the United States into World War II, the projected tenancy of the Homes was changed from low-income families to war workers and their families.¹⁸ When the war ended, it was changed again, this time to war veterans and their families. In these years, the complex had a racial make-up of 80 percent white and 20 percent black, in keeping with the Neighborhood Composition Rule, which forbade federally funded housing projects from altering the racial character of the neighborhoods where they were placed.¹⁹ According to one resident who lived in the Homes at this time, and was later interviewed by David Whitaker, the proportions were strictly adhered to:

Now, in order to move into the row houses—it was like, white, black, white, black in every other apartment—and a black individual could not move into the row houses unless a black moved out, or if you were white, a white would have to move out. That's how it worked, but there wasn't no black and white issues at that particular time. We would visit one another, drink coffee together, we had Bible classes together . . . You felt comfortable.²⁰

The 80:20 ratio, however, was short-lived. That is because in the years during and right after World War II, the neighborhood around the Cabrini Homes experienced yet another dramatic social transformation. During the 1940s, as part of the *second* “Great Migration” of southern rural blacks to northern cities (again motivated largely by wartime industrial expansion), the black population of the Near North Side tripled, from just over 5,000 to almost 18,000.²¹ By the end of the decade, blacks comprised nearly 80 percent of Zorbaugh's old Italian slum.²²

Despite these changes, from the mid-1940s well into the 1950s, the Lower North was a relatively peaceful place, with a diverse population and thriving small businesses that catered to whites and blacks alike. Here are some residents' memories of that time:

Down on Hudson Street there was apartment buildings and tenement houses, this was before they tore them down to build the

high-rises, and they went clean down to Division. There was stores over on Larrabee, like Pioneer Meat Market and Big Frank's and Del Farms, and they had restaurants and everything.²³

Oh, I remember Del Farms, and on down Larrabee you had Pioneers and then I think it was Kroger's. We had the A&P up on Clybourn, Greenman's store was at Franklin and Oak, Harry's drug store was on Oak and Larrabee and then the cleaners was right next door to that, and everybody knew everybody in this community.²⁴

There were also feasts and parades sponsored by the local Catholic parish, lovingly remembered to this day by some older residents of the row houses.²⁵

The number of blacks arriving on the Near North Side, however, kept increasing; and, in the early to mid-1950s, with plentiful new housing now available for whites in the suburbs outside of Chicago, the Italians began leaving in large numbers. Their departure did not, however, ease crowding on the Near North Side because there was so little new construction there, many families doubling and tripling up in tiny apartments.²⁶ Faced with this situation, the CHA in the late 1950s built the Cabrini Homes Extension: 1,925 units of public housing in fifteen seven-, ten- and nineteen-story red-brick high-rise buildings (the "Reds") on thirty-five acres of land right across the street from the Cabrini row houses. At the time, it was the largest public housing project ever constructed in Chicago.²⁷ And though these buildings did not age as well as the row houses, they were initially a step up for most of the families in the area.²⁸

By 1962, the neighborhood was virtually all black. That year, the CHA opened the William Green Homes: eight fifteen- and sixteen-story exposed-concrete high-rise buildings (the "Whites") comprising 1,096 housing units on nineteen acres across Division Street from the Cabrini Extension and named for a former president of the American Federation of Labor.²⁹ By now, as shown in table 1.1, the three projects of "Cabrini Green," two of them built under the watchful eyes of Mayor Richard J. Daley, contained more than 3,600 low-income housing units in seventy-eight buildings spread across seventy acres.³⁰ By the mid-1960s, according to official statistics, 15,000 people lived here, though the actual population was probably well over 20,000.³¹

The die was cast. If the neighborhood had always been, in Zorbaugh's term, a "slum," it earlier possessed redeeming features along with its troubles: racial and ethnic diversity; convenient access to plentiful low-skill jobs; numerous churches, social clubs, and cultural institutions; and a thriving small business community. Although the vast majority of residents were poor, most families (white and black) had at least one person employed outside the home, and there were many lower middle-class families who stayed even when their fortunes rose, wanting to remain close to friends, church, public transportation,

Table 1.1. The Projects of Cabrini Green

<i>Development</i>	<i>Year Built</i>	<i>Acres</i>	<i>Units</i>	<i>Building Type</i>	<i>Cost</i>
Frances Cabrini Homes	1942	16	586	2–3 story row houses (55 total)	\$3.7 million
Cabrini Homes Extension	1958	35	1,925	7- and 10-story mid-rises (12), 19-story high-rises (3) (15 total)	\$26 million
William Green Homes	1962	19	1,096	15- and 16-story rises (8 total)	\$30 million
Totals	1942–1962	70 acres	3,607 units	78 buildings	\$59.7 million

Sources: Devereaux Bowly, Jr., *The Poorhouse: Subsidized Housing in Chicago, 1895–1976* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978); Chicago Housing Authority, “Cabrini-Green Homes,” http://www.thecha.org/housingdev/cabrini_green_homes.html.

and the cultural vibrancy of a large city. By the early 1960s, however, the CHA had become the primary landlord in the area; and poor blacks, the majority of inhabitants. Everyone else fled. Even the St. Philip Benizi church, its parish long since relocated, was torn down in 1965.³² It was about this time that the urban black family itself began to deteriorate, casualty of a dramatic rise in joblessness, a large increase in welfare dependence, and a sharp decline in two-parent households.³³

By most accounts, however, the crowning blow for the neighborhood was the rioting that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968.³⁴ After that, many of the small businesses that had stuck around, some still owned by Italian-Americans, finally left. Whitaker’s interviewees are poignant about the impact of the riots on the neighborhood:

[I]t was real nice until those riots. That’s when all them businesses got burnt up. Really and truly, I think the Italians were ready to move out of here anyway, because it was becoming predominantly black, and they were ready to move. But a lot of those businesses up and down Larrabee didn’t go ’til then.³⁵

Del Farms grocery store was wrecked and at that time we didn’t have a car, so that meant we had to get the bus—we had five children—and we had to get the bus, go up on North Avenue to the grocery store and come back with food on the bus. And the neighborhood looked, it just, it really made you want to cry. . . . [I]t

gave you a scary feeling. . . . It was like we lost hope. . . . Those stores never came back.³⁶

That's when it got real bad, when they killed Martin Luther King. . . . [T]hey come all down here tearin' up and we had a lot of stores on Oak Street, and they tore all that up, burnt it up and I think they hurt some peoples too, but I stayed inside 'cause I got scared. It started to change right behind that. . . . After that, they never did build it back up.³⁷

For the next quarter century, the story of the northwestern corner of the Near North Side was one of almost continual woe.³⁸

In the 1970s, the CHA essentially abandoned Cabrini Green and its other projects. A major restructuring of the American economy shifted the nation's focus from manufacturing to services, a change especially harmful to the cities of the northeastern and north central regions. The urban renewal projects of the 1950s and '60s, meanwhile, merely created middle- and high-income buffers *around* places like Chicago's Lower North, shoring up the borders between it and the prospering neighborhoods nearby but doing little to improve conditions inside.³⁹ Cabrini Green was now largely hidden from the rest of the world and only noticed when the violence there became too horrendous to overlook.

Things got even worse in the 1980s when many of the working- and middle-class blacks who had remained in the central city finally gave up and left, moving into the inner-ring neighborhoods that working-class whites had abandoned (see table 1.2).⁴⁰ Vacancy rates at Cabrini Green climbed as high as one-third, making the project less crowded but ultimately more dangerous. Drug and gang problems worsened: in a nine-week period in early 1981, ten residents were murdered, thirty-five were wounded by gunshots, and fifty firearms were seized.⁴¹ That year, Mayor Jane Byrne and her husband moved in for three weeks to dramatize the neighborhood's plight. But the ploy accomplished little: in one half-vacant Cabrini Green building during one month in 1988, there were two murders, six rapes, nine assaults, fifteen robberies, and thirty-one shootings.⁴²

By the end of the 1980s, according to long-time observer Edward Marciniak, the neighborhood did not have a single supermarket, department store, movie house, bank, or drug store. What it did have were currency exchanges, vacant lots, and taverns.⁴³ In the early 1990s, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) was referring to Cabrini Green as "severely distressed," a place characterized by extreme poverty, high unemployment, school failure, violent crime, and physical blight.⁴⁴ The shooting death, in October 1992, of seven-year-old resident Dantrell Davis, walking to school with his mother, seemed to confirm the label.

Table 1.2. Population of Chicago's Near North Side, 1930–2000

Year	Total Pop.	# Blacks	% Blacks	% Change
1930	79,554	4,231	5.3	
1940	76,954	5,158	6.7	+21.9
1950	89,196	17,813	20.0	+245.3
1960	75,509	23,114	30.6	+29.8
1970	70,406	26,090	37.1	+12.9
1980	67,167	22,031	32.8	-15.6
1990	62,842	14,454	23.0	-34.4
2000	72,811	14,023	19.3	-3.0

Sources: Louis Wirth and Margaret Furez, eds., *Local Community Fact Book* (Chicago: Chicago Recreation Commission, 1938); Louis Wirth and Eleanor H. Bernert, eds., *Local Community Fact Book of Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949); Philip M. Hauser and Evelyn M. Kitagawa, eds., *Local Community Fact Book for Chicago, 1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); Evelyn M. Kitagawa and Karl E. Taeuber, eds., *Local Community Fact Book: Chicago Metropolitan Area, 1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963); Chicago Fact Book Consortium, *Local Community Fact Book: Chicago Metropolitan Area: Based on the 1970 and 1980 Censuses* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1984); Chicago Fact Book Consortium, *Local Community Fact Book: Chicago Metropolitan Area, 1990* (Chicago: University of Illinois at Chicago Press, 1995); the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission, "Census 2000 General Profiles for the 77 Chicago Community Areas," http://www.nipcc.org/test/Y2K_SF1_CCA.htm.

Compassionate Gentrification?

It was about this time that something unexpected happened here. The neighborhood began to attract positive attention from outsiders—local and national media, politicians, government bureaucrats, social activists, real estate developers, lawyers, architects, urban designers, and sociologists. In 1993, the CHA announced plans for a \$300 million makeover of Cabrini Green, including outright demolition of three buildings and the construction of several hundred new, low-rise, mixed-income housing units in the area—the first such plan for a Chicago public housing project. At the same time, the *Chicago Tribune* announced an international competition to redesign Cabrini Green; more than 300 entries from ten countries were sent in. Meanwhile, real estate developers began buying up land around the project, and prospective homeowners and tenants made inquiries about the area. And, as the first two Cabrini Green buildings were demolished in mid-1995, the residents themselves began organizing proposals for change. Lawyers, social activists, researchers, and others, not only in Chicago but around the country, began paying attention to what was happening in the neighborhood.

Then, in June 1996, Mayor Daley proposed his own transformation, the Near North Redevelopment Initiative (NNRI), which called for tearing down eight high-rises at Cabrini Green, building more than 2,300 new units of mixed-income housing in a 330-acre area around the project, and investing heavily in commercial and public facilities there, including a new shopping center, police station, library, three new schools, and upgraded parks. It was a stunningly ambitious, and expensive, plan.

The biggest project of all, however, was announced in 1999: the Chicago Housing Authority, just months after emerging from four years under federal control, proposed a \$1.6 billion “Plan for Transformation” of all public housing in the city, the centerpiece of which was the demolition of every high-rise building in the CHA’s stock of family developments, including all twenty-three high rises at Cabrini Green. Some of the units in those buildings, the CHA foresaw, would be replaced with new units in on-site, mixed-income, townhouse communities. Displaced residents who could not get one of those would receive vouchers for use on the private housing market. Cabrini Green was touted as a showcase for the new approach.

There are several potential explanations for this sudden interest in what had been, for years, just another poor black Chicago neighborhood. It is possible that the plight of Cabrini Green had become so bad by the early 1990s that outsiders finally stepped in, out of genuine concern, to help. In support of this theory, many point to the Dantrell Davis shooting as a turning point in the project’s history. And it is true that the incident galvanized residents and outsiders as nothing had before.⁴⁵ But other observers point to less altruistic reasons for the sudden interest in Cabrini Green at the end of the twentieth century. The 1980s witnessed a massive retreat from the New Deal/Great Society social contract between rich and poor in this country; and, even with a Democrat in the White House, the 1990s saw a continuation of that trend, with more funding cuts from antipoverty initiatives, more government programs privatized, and the public adopting an increasingly stingy attitude toward the poor.⁴⁶ By the late 1990s, proposing wholesale demolition, voucherization, and privatization, the federal government seemed to be trying to get out of the public housing business altogether, just as it was shedding its half-century commitment to the welfare program. The country seemed to have entered a “post-entitlement” era in terms of its social consciousness.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, as Cabrini Green was becoming more and more troubled, and the government less and less interested in managing it, the land *under* the project was actually rising in value. By the early 1990s, downtown Chicago had completed its transformation from being the center of an industrial juggernaut to being the hub of a regional service economy, and young white professionals began flocking downtown in search of near-in residences. Their gentrification of

the central city, especially the Near North, Near West, and Near South Sides, was encouraged by the city's business and political elite. What the residents of Cabrini Green had long feared seemed to be coming true: they were about to become the victims of a huge land grab.⁴⁸

But regardless of where the interest came from—genuine concern for the city's poor, the retreat of the federal government from its 1949 commitment to provide “a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family,”⁴⁹ the desire of real estate developers, city bureaucrats, and young white professionals to get their hands on valuable central city land—something dramatic was happening at Cabrini Green during the last years of the twentieth century. The neighborhood suddenly seemed almost plastic, as if it could be remade, overnight, in whatever shape was wanted. But what shape *was* wanted? what would the new neighborhood look like? who would live there? what kinds of lives would they lead? how would they relate to one another? and what would happen to those who no longer fit in?

Three Proposals

When I first began visiting Cabrini Green in the spring of 1999, very different answers were being offered to those questions. On one side were real estate developers and city bureaucrats beating a constant drum roll for demolition and redevelopment. On the other side were several thousand poor, black, mostly female-headed families living in the project and fighting to save their community. This was still, after all, their home, a place they had lived and struggled in for several generations. Now, the assistance programs they had relied on were being cut, there was an affordable housing shortage in the city, and the new economy continued to be inaccessible to them. What would happen to these families and the community they had, against all odds, built? The only receptive ears they found were in the federal courts, which in 1996 temporarily halted demolition at Cabrini Green on the grounds that the NNRI would have a disproportionately negative impact on the area's African-American women and children. But when a landmark 1998 consent decree giving project residents a 51 percent stake in the redevelopment of CHA land was voided, the future of the neighborhood was once again clouded in uncertainty.⁵⁰

As 2000 came and went, three proposals were garnering the most attention. One was focused on the public housing families themselves; its goal was to correct a century of residential racial segregation in Chicago by “dispersing” poor inner city blacks into the wider six-county metropolitan area and seeing to it that they would never again be concentrated and isolated, with government support, in urban ghettos. The most progressive version of this proposal used “mobility assistance” to relocate public housing residents from projects

like Cabrini Green to the white suburbs of Chicago, especially the job-rich communities of DuPage and northwestern Cook Counties. From the late 1970s to the late 1990s, over 7,000 black families from Chicago's inner city housing projects, including Cabrini Green, used federally funded vouchers, along with assistance from a court-ordered residential integration program, to move to the suburbs, where, researchers claim, they found a "geography of opportunity."

Another proposal was driven less by racial concerns than economic ones and was more concerned with revitalizing the inner city than abandoning it. It allowed some Cabrini Green residents to stay in the neighborhood but brought in large numbers of higher-income residents to live there as well. It called for the redevelopment of Cabrini Green as a low-rise, mixed-income townhouse community on the now-fashionable "New Urbanist" model. In most versions of this approach, about 30 percent of units are reserved for public housing families; the rest are sold or rented at market rate to moderate- and high-income customers, who (it is claimed) will serve as positive role models for the poor who remain and help revitalize the area with their disposable income. The local showcase for this approach is North Town Village, a \$70 million development built on seven acres of city-owned land next to Cabrini Green. The Village currently has 281 units of for-sale and rental townhouses, apartments, and condominiums, 30 percent for former public housing residents, 20 percent for the "working poor," and 50 percent for market-rate customers.

A third proposal was as different from the first two as they were from each other. It supported the empowerment of the poor African-American female-headed families living at Cabrini Green, requiring neither their relocation to white suburbs nor the immigration of higher-income residents to the inner city. Instead, it sought to protect and grow the community already in the area. The most compelling version of this proposal was the effort undertaken by one tenant group at the project to convert its building to a resident-owned and -managed housing cooperative. Beginning in 1992, a federally recognized resident management corporation (RMC) took over the fifteen-story, 126-unit building; and, in 2000, this RMC, made up almost entirely of middle-aged African-American women—single mothers and grandmothers—proposed converting the building into a democratically governed, not-for-profit housing co-op, one of the first such proposals in the history of U.S. public housing.

These are three radically different visions of the future of Cabrini Green and its people. They are different in the physical worlds they imagine: in one, single family homes in low-density, automobile-dependent suburbs; in another, a compact, pedestrian-friendly townhouse community; in the third, a densely populated urban high-rise. They are different in the demographic and economic characteristics they assume: in one, a job-rich, mostly white, upper- and middle-class world with a sprinkling of low-income minorities; in another, a lively "urban village" interspersing high-, middle-, and low-income residents, both

black and white; in the last, an all-black, working-class housing cooperative. And they are different in the images of civic life they portray: in one, a highly decentralized and fragmented social scene devoted to the private pursuit of wealth and happiness; in another, a diverse but tight-knit community built on close contact, mutual trust, and shared aspirations; in the third, a self-governed collective committed to the social, political, and economic empowerment of its members. They present the current inhabitants of Cabrini Green, in other words, with dramatically different snapshots of the world to come—for themselves, their children, and their children's children.

For these families, the stakes could not be higher. But what happens in this corner of Chicago is of significance, I believe, to us all. The effort to revitalize the neighborhood in and around Cabrini Green may well be the most ambitious remaking of the American metropolitan landscape in half a century. Perhaps nowhere and at no time in our country's history have so many complex and disparate forces—material and ideological, physical and cultural, social and economic, legal and political—collided in such a small space. Perhaps nowhere and at no time have so many different ideas about the good society come into conflict in such concrete and consequential ways. The stories surrounding this neighborhood—its troubled past, its unsettled present, its hesitant future—tell us much about the North American city at the beginning of the twenty-first century: about what has happened to our built world over the last fifty years and how we might build together a new world in the years to come, about the kinds of relations—physical, social, political, economic, cultural—we can imagine and facilitate among ourselves, a people so different from one another and yet so manifestly interdependent.

The Plan of the Book

The book that follows looks at this corner of the North American landscape through a specifically *rhetorical* lens, that is, as first and foremost a scene of social discourse. Now, rhetoric has always firmly embedded language use in social space—especially the space of politics. For the ancient Greeks who first conceptualized it, rhetoric was precisely the skill of inventing and delivering arguments in contexts of public debate and disagreement. In order to manage together their common world, citizens met in assemblies, courtrooms, council chambers, theaters, and other places to hear opposed speeches and pass judgment on the questions put to them. In this way, they governed themselves.⁵¹

Language so seen was a distinctly *political* way of being; it was not primarily for the Greeks, as it is for us, a way to express their thoughts and feelings; or a means of information exchange; or a form of domination and control. It was rather a social practice of simultaneous separation and connection: it was

how equals constituted their union without denying their differences, how they came together and, at the same time, marked their opposition, how they disagreed with one another while maintaining their association. It was how people who lived together managed their conflicts without relinquishing either their freedom or their proximity.

But for language to be this kind of practice, it needed a particular kind of setting: namely, an accessible, diverse, self-governing community, free from both external control (so that members could direct their collective future without interference) and internal domination (so that each member had an equal say in that future). It needed a community unified enough that its problems were genuinely shared but diverse enough that the solution to those problems required an airing of disagreement. It needed a community that literally set aside time and space for the public rendering and negotiation of conflicts. It needed, that is, a *polis*—geographically bounded, self-sufficient, and free—the kind of community that Aristotle called *specifically* human, defining “man” as in essence the “political” or city-living animal.⁵²

But if language needed the polis, the polis needed language as well. Speaking and writing were how citizens in such a society constituted themselves as a community, setting themselves off as a people with a shared history, gods, watering holes, and so on, and protected their freedom by *claiming* that freedom in concrete, everyday social action. Language was how such people participated in their group’s decision-making, defending themselves and attacking others, proposing some courses of action and criticizing others, agreeing and disagreeing with one another, asserting their share in governance by enacting that share in public discourse.⁵³

With the demise of the polis, however, citizens had fewer opportunities to participate directly in the governance of their own world, and politics became increasingly divorced from the commonplace and everyday. At some point, cities not only lost their power vis-à-vis empires, nations, and states, they essentially dropped out of history itself.⁵⁴ Today, “civic” activity in the West takes place largely against the backdrop of extensive representative democracies or virtual societies, defined less by shared space than by shared laws and interests. Two-sided argumentation by ordinary citizens, meanwhile, has lost its centrality; and rhetoricians have come to think of discourse less as an embodied social practice, situated in particular communities, than as a portable skill, comprised of such things as grammar rules, empty text structures, and a vague metadiscourse about clarity and coherence that can supposedly be taught and used independently of both content and context.⁵⁵

As for our cities, it’s hard to think of them as places where diverse individuals, free and equal, come together to make binding decisions about their common affairs. Our landscape not only separates us from one another and the world we share; it alienates us from our species-character as human beings.

We are the products of an insistent “privatism,” a way of life focused on the individual, his or her family, and their private search for personal happiness.⁵⁶ And, therefore, when faced with seemingly intractable social conflicts, the most resourceful among us simply retreat to communities of the like-minded. By dividing up the landscape this way, we have made local politics irrelevant because difference no longer confronts us. What’s worse, our children are growing up in communities whose very organization leads them to think of politics as something that occurs, if at all, elsewhere. As far as they can see, people who disagree with one another inhabit different parts of the landscape; as long as everybody stays where they are, conflict need not occur.⁵⁷ In sum, as our political and rhetorical theories and pedagogies have become anti-urban; our cities have become antipolitical and antirhetorical.⁵⁸

I try to show here what it means to live in such a world, where politics (the art of living with different others) and rhetoric (the art of rendering and negotiating difference) have been divorced from each other, and both have been torn from their original context, the independent, democratic city. But if I argue for a revival of the old nexus among these three, the vision I propose is not, I hope, merely nostalgic. Despite globalization, despatialization, and sprawl, we still live together in permanent settlements: if anything, we are more enmeshed in our cities—more “political”—than ever, and those cities are more diverse, and more complex, than ever. And thus, despite the troubling nature of what I observe and describe in this book, I try to offer in the end a glimmer of hope. After all, rhetoric and design share a positive orientation toward the world, a creative impulse, a commitment to fashioning practical solutions to common problems. Perhaps bringing them together can help us rethink and rebuild our communities.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part is a theoretical introduction to the whole idea of rhetorical space. It opens in chapter 2 with the problem of citizenship in a world where politics is no longer linked to place, proximity, and the body. I develop there a theory of situated citizenship that I believe can help us better meet our responsibilities to the world and one another. In chapter 3, I examine different sites of such citizenship, including both the nation-state and the neighborhood, two prominent scenes of civic community. I end up, however, proposing the *city*, with its urban districts and metropolitan surroundings, as the ideal space of genuinely political discourse in our society.

Unfortunately, the cities of contemporary North America are not, in general, very promising scenes of public life. We will see in this book how much they suffer politically and rhetorically from the socioeconomic fragmentation, decentralization, and polarization of the United States. The question is, can they be improved? Can they be transformed into sites of authentic civic argumentation? To answer those questions, I turn in part II to a case study of

urban design: the ongoing revitalization of the Cabrini Green neighborhood on Chicago's Near North Side. After providing historical background to the formation of the Chicago ghetto in chapter 4, I examine three options for revitalizing this particular neighborhood. Chapter 5 explores the idea that the problem behind inner-city, African-American poverty is the city itself; and the solution, suburban relocation. Chapter 6 considers another theory: that the best hope for Cabrini Green's families is poverty deconcentration, best effected by "importing" higher-income residents to the central city and allowing some of the poor families to stay. Chapter 7, meanwhile, posits a very different idea: that urban African-American poverty is a function of social oppression and political marginalization, and its solution: helping low-income, inner-city blacks chart their own destiny and take control of their own neighborhoods.

On the one hand, all three ideas promise to lessen the fragmentation and polarization of the North American metropolitan landscape. And there are hopeful signs here for the racial and economic integration of the suburbs, the amelioration of urban poverty, and the physical revitalization of our central cities. But there are also problems. The favored suburbs turn out to be largely closed to economic and racial integration, and Chicago's blacks do not seem to want to move to such places anyway. Meanwhile, the social bracketing behind income mixing, in which residents are supposed to check their race, class, religion, ethnicity, and family status at the door of the new housing developments, turns out to be impractical. Instead, what we see are group characteristics becoming even more salient, blacks losing what little power they had in the central city, and the white upper-classes assuming an undeserved position of moral authority. As for empowerment, the experiment at 1230 North Burling Street comes dangerously close to constituting a racial and economic enclave, predicated as it is on isolation from the mainstream. In the end, the old metropolitan patterns are left unchallenged, even strengthened.

Part III tries to tease out some general lessons from all this. Clearly, places matter; they differ radically from one another; and those differences contribute to social, political, economic, and rhetorical inequality. The idea that we have slipped the bonds of earth, are now independent of place—floating symbolic analysts, mobile information workers—is false. We remain physical creatures, inherently embodied, inextricably situated, resolutely sensitive to proximity; and the weakest and most vulnerable among us remain the most spatially dependent of all. So, in chapter 8, I lay out some broad principles for reflecting responsibly on civic life in contemporary metropolitan North America. First, we need to seriously consider, together, the real condition and role of our bodies in social life, including our manifest needs as physical creatures and our patent vulnerabilities as human beings. And we need, therefore, to make safe and affordable housing a right for all; we need to develop place-based economic policies; and we need to take greater responsibility for the care of our natural and built

environments. Second, we need to reimagine politics as taking place in a wide range of sociospatial units so that citizens have a multitude of overlapping, quasi-sovereign communities to participate in, with different units empowered to make different kinds of decisions. Finally, we need to recommit ourselves to open, accessible, diverse, unitary, and empowered *centers* of human settlement: to cities, the urban districts that make them up, and the metropolitan regions that surround them.

But we need to make changes in our rhetorical practices as well—the focus of chapter 9. My overall purpose here, after all, is to better understand the relationship between language and the built world. In the contemporary United States, I believe, our discourse fails to acknowledge our dependence on that world, to recognize the extent to which we are *embodied* actors in our communities. We need a language, therefore, that promotes stability and depth rather than movement and superficiality and that fosters communal attachment rather than self-interest. But there is another problem with our public discourse: its failure to see *conflict* as natural, generative, and good. When faced with conflict, we have tended to believe that we must either separate or assimilate, either avoid difference, turning our back on people unlike us, or purify it, pretending that conflicts are mistakes and that we can live in harmony only if we see the errors of our ways.

We need a third alternative, a practice that acknowledges, even celebrates, conflict but also attempts to resolve that conflict through debate, deliberation, and adjudication. To sustain that practice, however, we need more and better *commonplaces* where people can literally come together to discuss and negotiate their differences, where their freedom and equality can be enacted without either alienation or amalgamation. And we need a public philosophy that says: difference is normal and good; because of it, we must talk to one another; the result of this talking will not always be to our liking, but we will come back the next day to do it all over again.

But here's the rub: to acquire these habits and dispositions, we need settings where they can be practiced, where we can literally see our diversity, where we belong but others belong as well, people who are different from us but with whom we are interdependent precisely because we live together. In other words, we need changes in our *rhetorics* that will help us practice better public problem-solving, and we need changes in our *environments* that will bring us closer together so that such problem-solving is unavoidable.

But let us begin with a bit of political theory.