

# CURRENT BOOKS

*Reviews of new and noteworthy nonfiction*

## *The Heart of the City*

*DOWNTOWN:*

*Its Rise and Fall, 1880–1950.*

By Robert M. Fogelson. Yale Univ. Press. 492 pp. \$35

*Reviewed by Witold Rybczynski*

**T**he almighty downtown of the past is gone—and gone for good,” Robert Fogelson writes in his stimulating new history of a long-neglected subject. “And it has been gone much longer than most Americans realize.” The second part of this statement encapsulates his provocative thesis: that long before the failures of urban renewal, the intrusions of urban interstate highways, and the competition of suburban shopping malls and office parks, the downtown was on the wane.

The few recent books on the downtown have been works of urban advocacy, arguing that this precious part of our heritage must be saved, revitalized, restored. This approach tends to cast a rosy and nostalgic light on the past. By contrast, Fogelson, a professor of urban studies and history at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, approaches the subject dispassionately and meticulously, and in the process punctures a few myths.

First of all, he points out the unusualness—indeed, the uniqueness—of the extremely dense, nonresidential district in the center of the city. Although the popular media refer to “downtown Madrid” or even “downtown Kabul,” these cities actually scatter and mix work, entertainment, shopping, and living. They don’t have downtowns in the American sense.

The concentration of the American downtown, particularly in its heyday of the 1910s and 1920s, was extraordinary.

Typically covering less than a square mile, the downtown district included all of the city’s business offices, all of its government offices, most of its professional offices, all of its department stores, most of its large hotels and restaurants, and a host of other services. Conspicuously absent were homes. You didn’t live downtown, but if you wanted to see a lawyer, or go to a nightclub or a movie, or shop, or have



*The Chicago Loop, State and Madison Streets, 1910*

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dinner, this is where you came. On a typical day in 1920, more than three-quarters of a million people poured into downtown Chicago or Philadelphia. “It is safe to say that most people who lived in big cities—as many as one-half to two-thirds, according to one transit engineer—went downtown every day in the mid and late 1920s,” writes Fogelson.

Those who didn’t come on foot often rode a streetcar, another American phenomenon. Philadelphia, an average American city in regard to streetcars, in 1890 had more than three times as many miles of track per capita as Berlin, five times as many as Paris, and eight times as many as London. But as American downtowns became denser and streets more congested, the pace of traffic—streetcars included—significantly slowed.

Something had to be done. Chicago and New York City built elevated railways, which produced a great deal of noise and darkened the street as well as adjacent properties. This “solution” provoked much opposition and didn’t spread to other cities. Underground railways, pioneered in London, were an alternative. But going underground was extremely expensive, and many people believed that it would only increase downtown congestion.

Whereas today support for or rejection of mass transportation often marks the divide between liberals and conservatives, this was not always the case. In the 1920s, opponents of downtown subways and elevated trains included such progressive groups as the Regional Plan Association of New York and the American Institute of Architects. Supporters included downtown businesses and city administrations, for whom downtown property taxes were a major source of revenue. But few American cities were dense enough to justify the cost of rapid transit, whether below or above ground. By the late 1920s, Fogelson writes, the country had only about 350 miles of rapid transit lines (of which a little more than a third ran underground, mostly in New York City and Boston), compared to 41,000 miles of traditional streetcar tracks. The intense debates over mass transit illustrate one of Fogelson’s themes: Americans, even as they built it and used it, felt deeply ambivalent about downtown.

As American downtowns expanded between 1880 and 1930, they tended to get taller. This

is a crucial part of the story, for vertical growth not only created the requisite density, it also tended to raise property values, which discouraged all but commercial and retail uses.

Skyscrapers are a popular symbol of downtown, yet Americans were not universally enthusiastic about tall buildings. Between 1880 and 1910, a remarkable number of cities adopted height limits, often around 10 stories (rather than, as in European cities, six or seven stories): Boston, Baltimore, St. Louis, Cleveland, New Orleans, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and even the city considered the cradle of skyscraper architecture, Chicago (though its 130-foot limit was often breached in practice). Holdouts included New York City and Philadelphia—where the majority of early American skyscrapers were built—as well as Detroit, Pittsburgh, and Minneapolis. In the end, tall buildings didn’t really matter. Downtown Philadelphia, which had many tall buildings, and downtown Boston, which had only two buildings higher than 20 floors, declined equally in importance.

The cause for downtown’s decline lay elsewhere. In 1941, John A. Miller, a transportation consultant, observed: “The basic question is whether we can retain the city as a central market place, and at the same time decentralize residences to the extent that everyone lives out in the suburbs or country.” It was a rhetorical question. For more than a decade, the answer had been apparent: Once people lived far from downtown, and especially once they traveled by automobiles rather than the crowded and unreliable streetcars, it was no longer logical to have a single center for the entire metropolitan area. Downtown merchants and bankers built suburban branches, and downtown hotels gave way to suburban motels. Although advocates hailed the downtown as the indispensable heart of the city, many cities flourished despite weak hearts; and the second-largest city in the country, Los Angeles, became an economic powerhouse without ever having an important downtown (Houston, Dallas, and Atlanta later repeated this pattern).

Fogelson describes various attempts in the 1930s and 1940s to stem the tide and bring citizens back downtown. These included expanded mass transit, road improvements, and expanded parking. Immediately after World War II, there was also slum clearance—

the antecedent to the urban renewal projects of the 1960s. If the blighted areas adjacent to downtown could be improved, the reasoning went, the middle class would return, and downtown would thrive once more.

But by then it was too late. The chief reason that Americans stopped going downtown, according to Fogelson, is that they no longer needed to—or wanted to. “For the average person it might have been a thrill to go downtown in the late 19th and early 20th centuries,” he writes. “It might even have been a thrill in the 1920s, when the downtown hotels, department stores, office buildings, and movie theaters dazzled the senses—and, with their doormen, bellhops, elevator operators, shoeshine boys, sales-girls, floorwalkers, and ushers, offered a level of service that all but disappeared in the second half of the 20th century. But by mid 20th century the thrill was largely gone.”

Fogelson breaks off his account in 1950, so he doesn’t deal with the ballyhooed downtown revivals of the 1980s and 1990s. But his balanced, sobering history leaves little doubt that, whatever the future holds for downtown, its

glory days are past. It is now merely one of several metropolitan centers, and in many cities not even the most important one.

*Downtown* contains an evocative photograph of the Chicago Loop—the corner of State and Madison Streets—taken around 1910. The scene is enormously crowded. Lines of streetcars are backed up, and the street is flooded with people who have spilled over from the broad sidewalks. It’s a serious crowd, the men in suits and hats, the women in long, dark dresses. The atmosphere is one of busyness and purposeful activity. What a contrast to downtowns of today, which are almost never this crowded, and whose chief occupants are either the poor or idling tourists. The almighty downtown, which didn’t just dominate the metropolitan region but came to stand for the American city itself, is truly gone.

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## *Bound and Determined*

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*THE CORSET:*

*A Cultural History.*

By Valerie Steele. Yale Univ. Press. 199 pp. \$39.95

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*UPLIFT:*

*The Bra in America.*

By Jane Farrell-Beck and Colleen Gau. Univ. of Pennsylvania Press. 243 pp. \$35

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*Reviewed by Eve Auchincloss*

As Marie Antoinette rode in a cart to her execution, hair cropped and hands tied behind her back, the artist Jacques Louis David, who was in the crowd, did a quick, cruel sketch of her in profile, back arched, and bosom thrust forward but drooping as it would not have done had she been wearing a corset. In all of Vigée Marie Lebrun’s portraits of her, whether in shepherdess muslins or court finery, the breasts are pushed high and the back is proudly straight. Even in the

queen’s last moments, uncorseted, her body assumed the posture that tightly laced stays had exacted throughout her life.

Since the Renaissance, when clothes were first cut and tailored rather than simply draped, aristocratic women—later those of all classes, and men too—improved the body underneath with corsets that affirmed the wearer’s respectability and sex appeal. In a handsomely illustrated history of the corset, Valerie Steele, the author of *Fifty Years of Fashion*