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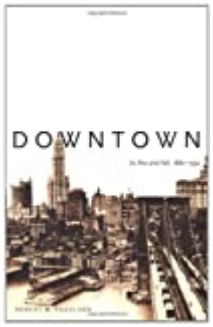

Robert M. Fogelson. *Downtown: Its Rise and Fall, 1880-1950.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. x + 492 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-09062-8; $23.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-09827-3.

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"For reasons that elude me," writes Robert M. Fogelson, "American historians, who have written so much about suburbs and ghettos, have written very little about downtown"(p. 7). Fogelson aims to correct this imbalance in his copiously documented study, *Downtown: Its Rise and Fall, 1880-1950.* This important contribution to the historiography of urban space chronicles a long, losing battle by downtown business interests to maintain a thriving metropolitan core.

Fogelson's story is a depressing one of futility and blindness. Property owners, city officials and business leaders clung to a peculiarly resilient faith in "spatial harmony." They assumed that the natural anatomy of a city included a strong central "heart," whose healthy functioning was essential to the well being of the entire metropolis. What was good for the downtown was good for the city, and vice versa. The dispersal of residences toward the periphery did not threaten the central business district, according to this view, because people would continue to work, shop, and amuse themselves downtown. All that was needed was to ensure an easy journey by rapid transit or by automobile. Surprisingly few observers seem to have understood that improved transportation would hasten the dispersion not only of residences, but eventually all the economic functions of the old downtowns.

The story begins with the development of a recognizably modern downtown, a unique creation of the late-nineteenth-century United States. This compact area of huge department stores and towering office buildings arose at the hub of the city's streetcar system. Measuring less than a square mile, the late nineteenth-century downtown contained virtually all of the city's important financial, governmental, and retail institutions, along with its corporate offices and much of its light industry, public amusements, and wholesaling. Concentration was seen as a great convenience for business, while proximity to the transportation hub facilitated the daily tides of workers and shoppers. Downtown streets inevitably became congested. Americans witnessed an increasing distinction between the bustling core and the quiet periphery; if they could afford it, they chose to live in the periphery. "Most Americans did not object to the separation of businesses and residences. Far from it. The good community, they thought, was one in which the home was separate from the workplace" (p. 31).

Downtown business interests advocated rapid transit systems to ensure that the spreading population continued to come downtown. In the enormous metropoles of New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia, as well as in secondary centers such as Cincinnati and Seattle, businessmen argued that subways would benefit the en-

tire city by promoting the continued health of its all-important heart. The subway campaigns ran into resistance not only from cost-conscious taxpayers, but–more ominously–from outlying business associations and neighborhood groups. These opponents questioned the prevailing ideas of spatial harmony by suggesting that what helped downtown might hurt the development of the periphery. A similar "spatial politics" could be seen in the discussions over height restrictions on skyscrapers. Tall buildings allowed downtowns to expand upward, rather than outward, thus undermining the speculative hopes of those who owned property and businesses in the immediately adjacent neighborhoods. Downtown businessmen did support the weak restrictions on building height, but mainly just to bring some stability to downtown real estate prices.

Conflicts between the center and periphery intensified as the twentieth century progressed, Fogelson argues. The downtown–or "central business district," as it was now frequently called–faced greater rivalry from satellite business districts. More and more of the downtown's economic functions spread outward. Industries, cultural institutions, entertainment venues, and retail stores (particularly chain stores) sought locations in less congested, less expensive areas. Many shoppers preferred to patronize stores near their homes rather than to brave the traffic jams at the city's core. Downtown businessmen came to recognize themselves as an interest group distinct from the interests of the city as a whole, and expressed this awareness by forming downtown business organizations in the 1930s. The downtown stagnated during the Depression, of course, but its problems were not simply caused by the nationwide economic crisis. As property owners and businessmen realized, the health of the downtown was seriously threatened by decentralization, whose effects became even more noticeable once prosperity returned in the 1940s.

In retrospect, it seems almost tragic that downtown interests in the mid-twentieth century welcomed the construction of freeways. Fogelson explains this blind optimism by putting it in the context of a long history of efforts to ease access to the urban core. Many businessmen and government officials regarded the limited-access highway as a modern version of the older elevated railways and subways. A few of the more far-sighted observers, though, saw that dense owntowns could never conveniently accommodate motorists and that the freeways would only accelerate the departure of downtown businesses. "I am not sure," admitted Detroit Mayor Edward J. Jeffries in 1944, "whether bringing people [into the heart of the city] more expeditiously and quickly than they have ever been able to get in before will not be the ultimate ruination of Detroit" (p. 317). And so it was. Downtown business interests saw too late that residential dispersion was robbing them of their best customers. They supported costly and disruptive urban renewal projects in a desperate attempt to return the middle class to the fringe of the downtown.

After decades of campaigns for improved transit, freeways, parking, and urban renewal, after prodigious public spending and massive displacements of poor people and neighborhood businesses, many mid-twentieth century observers doubted whether downtown could ever compete against outlying business districts. Some questioned whether downtown was necessary or even desirable in an age when nuclear bombs could incinerate any densely occupied area. Here the story ends, with the collapse of the ideology of "spatial harmony." Despite the late twentieth-century revival of some downtowns, Fogelson concludes, "nowhere has the central business district regained the position it held in the 1910s and 1920s–or even in the 1940s and 1950s" (p. 397).

Downtown is an essential contribution to the historiography of urban space, built on vast research. To some extent, it does for the urban core what Kenneth Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier* did for the periphery.[1] Though much of Fogelson's book covers topics that have already been addressed by other historians, it does so with a strong, unified vision, and with a thoroughness that will make it of lasting use as a reference work.

Despite its length, however, Fogelson's book lacks the scope of Jackson's engaging overview of American suburban history. Focusing mainly on the "spatial politics" of real estate and business interests, Fogelson does not capture a sense of how the downtown was experienced by ordinary people. There are some interesting passages on women in the late-nineteenth-century downtown and hints that the downtown may have had different meanings for immigrants and African Americans. But for the most part, the author is content to allude vaguely to public preferences, as if the public is an undifferentiated mass. Nor does he do much to examine the image of the downtown in twentieth-century American culture. These are curious omissions, given that Fogelson ultimately blames the decline of downtown on "the American vision of the 'bourgeois utopia.' "[397] After exhaustive examination of conflict over subways, zoning regulations and parking policy, it turns out that deeper ideological issues are more impor-

tant! To be fair, the question of ideology runs as a subtext through even the driest passages on parking meters. Still, nowhere does the book fully explore what ordinary Americans–the men and women of various classes and ethnic backgrounds–thought about the downtown. Nor does Fogelson fully explore how the downtown was influenced by larger socioeconomic changes such as the expansion of the middle class in the twentieth century. Perhaps further research will pick up these loose ends.

As is customary in American urban historiography, *Downtown* neglects small and medium-sized cities, the far more typical urban settings, in favor of the largest metropolitan centers. The failure of downtown is actually more striking in small and medium-sized cities, places such as New Britain and Fort Wayne, whose centers lack the sustaining corporate presence of even such notorious big-city wastelands as downtown Detroit. Perhaps the decline of the smaller downtowns is so obvious that it needs little documentation, but it might have been interesting to compare how it differed from the decline of the big-city downtowns.[2]

Fogelson's book would have been richer if he had broadened his scope instead of piling on examples of "spatial politics" from one big city after another. Nevertheless, the book is unquestionably a major achievement, a necessary part of any urban historian's library. It will help remind us that the downtown is, after all, a special part of the urban landscape, and deserving of as much scholarly attention as the suburbs and the ghettos.

Notes

[1]. Kenneth T. Jackson. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

[2]. At the other extreme on the urban spectrum, the spatial history of the small-town center is described in Richard V. Francaviglia, *Main Street Revisited: Time, Space, and Image-Building in Small-Town America.* American Land and Life Series. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996.