Book reviews: Tales of two big American cities

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By Glenn C. Altschuler /

Chicago liked watching things being built," the late Severn Darden, an original member of The Second City comedy troupe, once said. "New York audiences like to watch things that are already completed and polished."

Darden is scarcely the only person to compare New York and Chicago -- or to reflect on their distinctive qualities. After all, with the possible exception of Los Angeles, which is really a collection of suburbs connected by highways, they are America's quintessential cities.

Two books published this spring capture the dynamism and the defects of New York and Chicago during their heydays in the middle of the 20th century. They remind us that, for better and worse, our great urban centers have been magnets for immigrants, seedbeds for creativity and innovation in public and private activity, and stimulants of modernity and mass-market culture.

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Originally a doctoral dissertation at Columbia University, "City of Ambition" provides a richly detailed examination of the improbable political partnership between President Franklin D. Roosevelt, a Democrat, and Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, a Republican, to help New York City recover from the depths of the Great Depression in the 1930s and '40s. Mason B. Williams uses his narrative -- which is, in essence, a political biography of LaGuardia -- to praise the New Deal experiment in "inter-government relations" and to admonish 21st-century opponents of an expansive role for the federal government.

The New Deal proved, he claims, that "cooperative federalism," characterized by shared national, local and state responsibilities, was not a zero-sum game. By combining the resources in Washington with the operational capacity of municipalities, the New Deal "enabled local action rather than displacing it."

Mr. Williams shares LaGuardia's view that government's relationship to society and the economy should not be tightly circumscribed but used (when states and localities cannot adequately address the challenges they face) as an instrument to implement the collective good. Public investment, he writes, is a "lost legacy" of the New Deal, which provided an infrastructure (including roads, bridges and schools) that also permitted private industry to flourish.

Although "City of Ambition" makes a compelling case for public investment, Mr. Williams does not always refute its critics. He indicates, for example, that studies showed that the Works Progress
Administration construction was inefficient and that the same projects could have been done for 50-60 percent of the cost. Without elaborating, however, he moves on, citing impartial audits that found that the WPA projects were, "by and large, of notably high quality." His book underscores, no doubt inadvertently, how difficult it is to parse the dueling statistics advanced by New Deal and anti-New Deal partisans.

The New Deal, Mr. Williams emphasizes, occurred at "a singular moment." When the Depression emergency ended, and millions of Americans moved to the suburbs, producing downward pressure on central city property values, the politics of New York City -- and other large urban centers -- became a contest between "endless ambitions" and "finite resources." Obscured by the remarkable prosperity of the post-World War II baby boom decades, problems returned, with a vengeance, in the 1970s, exacerbated by racial tensions and, ironically, because the revolution in expectations generated by the New Deal pushed municipal spending even higher.

Although the threat of default passed, Mr. Williams concludes, New York politicians were left to wonder, with the New Deal legacy largely undone, how (and whether) they could govern their cities. Although he does not assess the administrations of mayors Rudolph Giuliani and Michael Bloomberg, it seems clear that Mr. Williams believes the jury is still out on the future of The Big Apple.

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Although Thomas Dyja, the author of three novels and two nonfiction books, has a lot to say about the career of Mayor Richard J. Daley, "The Third Coast" addresses architecture, literature, popular culture, commerce and race as well as politics in a beautifully written and lively history of Chicago in the 1940s and '50s.

Filled with splendid sketches of denizens of the Windy City -- Mies van der Rohe, Hugh Hefner, Mahalia Jackson, Studs Terkel, Nelson Algren, Ray Kroc, Emmett Till, and Kukla, Fran and Ollie -- Mr. Dyja demonstrates that during this era Chicago "produced much of what the world now calls 'American." And that his cast of characters "lived in a unique Chicago way -- creatively, commercially, racially and ethically in the crossroads, the place where you go to meet opportunities, and the devil."

At times, to be sure, Mr. Dyja's claims for Chicago are a bit pretentious. Black Chicago, he claims, "had tipped the balance of power in America." Upset at the prospect of the subordination of populist ideals to a national mass market culture, driven by Big Business, Mr. Dyja opines that Chicago "would decide whether Henry Luce's American Century would co-exist with the Century of the Common Man."

"The Third Coast" makes its most memorable and enduring contributions, it seems to me, when Mr. Dyja scrutinizes, celebrates or skewers Chicago's illustrious alumni. Robert Maynard Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, he writes, was "a taller, more refined version of the young Tim Robbins." Eager to be profound, he "was best known for his surface," which was probably beneficial "because Chicago's most famous intellectual was not particularly well read." Ensoconced late in his career at the Ford Foundation, where he championed public broadcasting, Mr. Hutchins "made his greatest contribution to the things he hated most," the atomic bomb and television.

Rather immature as a parent, Mr. Dyja reveals, Mamie Till made a decision that helped spark the modern civil rights movement. When she saw the body of her teenage son, who had been murdered in...
Mississippi, reduced "to a thing," with drooping flesh, bulging tongue, eyes hanging out of their sockets, identifiable only by the signet ring on his finger, she insisted on an open casket at the funeral. Five days later Jet magazine ran photos of the body in what became "a catalyzing moment" for racial justice.

Although he can be tough, Mr. Dyja is, at heart, a romantic. Like Mason Williams, he is in mourning for a city that lost 1 million residents as New York grew and Los Angeles became the Second City of the 21st century. A city that is not what (he thought) it once was or what (he thinks) it should have (and maybe even could have) been. Mr. Dyja blames a "cynical and power hungy" Mayor Daley, whose "retail politics was to democratic government what McDonald's was to food and Playboy to sex: a processed and mass-marketed simulation." He blames Chicagoans, for not minding "a city chasing out, even demolishing, what was best about itself," as long "as the buildings went up, union jobs kept paying, and their block stayed one color."

Mr. Dyja finds more than the writer intended in a statement in the Chicago Tribune that "nothing can possibly be wrong with Chicago which is not also wrong with the 20th century, with the American way of life, with the achievements and spirits of an age of mechanization." And he stands with novelist Nelson Algren, who suspected in 1957, the year America's first satellite soared into space, that "we are well on the way to gaining a moon and losing ourselves."

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