

Localism in the Mass Age

A
FRONT PORCH REPUBLIC
MANIFESTO

The strength of free peoples resides in the local community.

—ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, *DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA*

Part Six

The Urban Challenge

*These and all else were to me the same as they are to you,
I loved well those cities, loved well the stately and rapid river,
The men and women I saw were all near to me.*

—WALT WHITMAN, “CROSSING BROOKLYN FERRY”

*Chicago 2109: The Metropolitan Region as Agrarian-Urban Unit*¹

PHILIP BESS

THE FRONT PORCH REPUBLIC (FPR) is perceived by many as an agrarian movement and without doubt bears within itself an ideal of communities of self-governing yeoman proprietors of small farms, businesses, and manufacturing operations. Among its intellectual heroes—Wendell Berry, Alasdair MacIntyre, Jane Jacobs, E.F. Schumacher, Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, Dorothy Day, *The Southern Agrarians*, G.K. Chesterton, Henry George, Alexis de Tocqueville, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, ultimately and inevitably Aristotle—many do argue that normative human flourishing is essentially small, agrarian, and rural. Nevertheless, many FPR thinkers contend that *place, limits, and liberty* are not necessarily anti-urban ideals and that such ideals both can and should be characteristic of larger and denser urban environments. So can human flourishing—understood per Aristotle as a life of moral and intellectual excellence lived in community with others—occur in a modern metropolitan environment? Can a modern metropolis be (re)conceived as a *range* of less-dense-rural-to-more-dense-urban settlements that cumulatively, at the scale of a metropolitan region, attain the local intimacy, beauty, formal legibility, and densities of human capital that have historically made cities both central to the dynamics of human achievement, discovery and excellence, *and* as beautiful places that feel like and anticipate home?

1. The author acknowledges financial support for *The Notre Dame Plan of Chicago 2109* from The Historical Society, as part of its two-year multi-disciplinary research project *Religion and Innovation*, and also from the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions, Princeton University.

I want to address these questions by way of an exercise that imagines the future of a specific place. The exercise operates with two foundational premises. One is that almost all human beings view individual freedom—the ability to be an agent of one’s own life—as a genuine human good. The second, equally important, is that almost all human beings experience communal belonging—the pursuit with others of a shared goal, with attendant obligations and pleasures—as a genuine human good. Understanding these as constitutive elements of human nature (axioms of human being, as it were), and understanding as well the inherent tensions these two goods necessarily engender, goes far toward explaining differences of political opinion even among persons of good will; and this is because different people (whether by temperament, or simply at different points in their lives) are disposed to emphasize freedom over belonging and vice versa. Nevertheless, if both premises are true, two conclusions seem to follow: a) it is essential to both individual and communal human flourishing that people discover some kind of nexus, however temporal or imperfect, between these two great goods; and b) the very boundaries of just and humane civil discourse are defined by a common acknowledgment that both of these great human goods require political recognition.

To the aforementioned premises add a third: *beautiful and durable places that we love and in which we feel at home provide the best context for human life, and best support the inventiveness and daring that human flourishing in any age demands*. Mindful of these premises, and mindful also of a certain mid-western sensibility characteristic of the Front Porch Republic, let us ponder the mid-west’s aspiring but probably doomed-to-fail global city: Chicago. Understand that I do not think Chicago is doomed to fail *as a city*, only rather as a post-humanist *global city*; and this is because, by the criteria of humanist urbanism, it is possible that most if not all global cities will fail.

William Cronon’s *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* is a landmark in the long-term cultural project to recover from and move beyond ruthless 20th century applications of Cartesian rationality to human occupation of the landscape. Cronon’s book occasions ‘a-ha’ moments for many readers about several important realities: that cities and landscapes are not independent and competing entities but rather mutually defining and mutually dependent entities; that the city itself is best understood as part of an agrarian–urban unit; that human beings are not independent of nature but rather part of nature; and that it is part of *human* nature to make a variety of human settlement types,

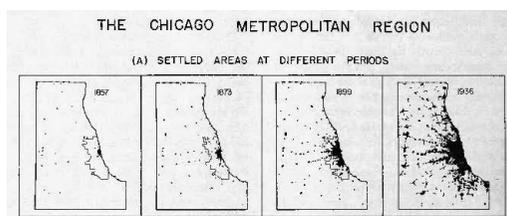


FIGURE 1: The Growth of Chicago Regional Population

Left to Right, 1857: 271,000 / 1873: 506,000 / 1899: 2,146,000 / 1936: 4,581,000
from Homer Hoyt, *The Structure and Growth of Residential Neighborhoods in American Cities* (FHA, 1939)

including cities—which means that cities, though artifacts, are also *natural*. Nineteenth-century Chicago was both a milestone and a paradigm of the industrial era [FIG.1], a modern mega-city that arose virtually overnight in the theretofore pre-modern center of a continent, that harnessed (uneasily and incompletely) the forces of modernity to transform its aboriginal western landscape at a historically unprecedented scale and speed. Chicago in the nineteenth century became an inland economic giant, a continental nation's center for the sale and distribution of grain, lumber, and meat by virtue of its geographical location, its dominance as a railroad hub, and the entrepreneurial genius of its residents.

Cronon's concluding chapter alludes to Chicago's efforts early in the 20th century to figure out what to do with the wealth nineteenth-century Chicagoans had created, how to contain if not repair the environmental damage they had caused, how best to govern themselves, and how best to live; that is, Cronon's work raises philosophical and existential questions about nature, human nature, and human settlements that historians *qua* historians cannot answer. *Nature's Metropolis* correctly identifies human beings as part of nature but addresses neither human exceptionalism nor questions about obligation and stewardship (and their further implications) that necessarily arise from considering our collective human powers and capacities. Likewise, *Nature's Metropolis* does not address directly the meaning of human flourishing, or the relationship of human flourishing to environmental and economic sustainability. Nor does it address questions about urban teleology, i.e., the nature and purpose of cities. And finally, though it alludes to the subject in its final chapter, *Nature's Metropolis* does not address directly the issue of urban form and how urban form is related to ideas of both the city and human flourishing.

Happily, however, there is a long intellectual and artistic tradition of classical humanist urbanism that addresses each of these issues: an intellectual tradition as old as Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, and an artistic tradition theorized by Vitruvius in the oldest remaining architectural treatise from classical antiquity, the *De architectura* (or *Ten Books on Architecture*). And especially happily for my purposes here, it is a tradition once brought to bear upon Chicago by Daniel Burnham in the 1909 *Plan of Chicago* that Burnham designed and co-authored with Edward Bennett.

The *Plan of Chicago* is noteworthy for many reasons. It was exemplary in the regional environmental scope of its ambitions [FIG.2] and in its proposal to preserve metropolitan Chicago's lakefront and forests as public places. It was also exemplary in its desire for a civic realm of beautiful buildings and spaces formed to engage an urban population gathered from all over the world and to foster in them affection for a

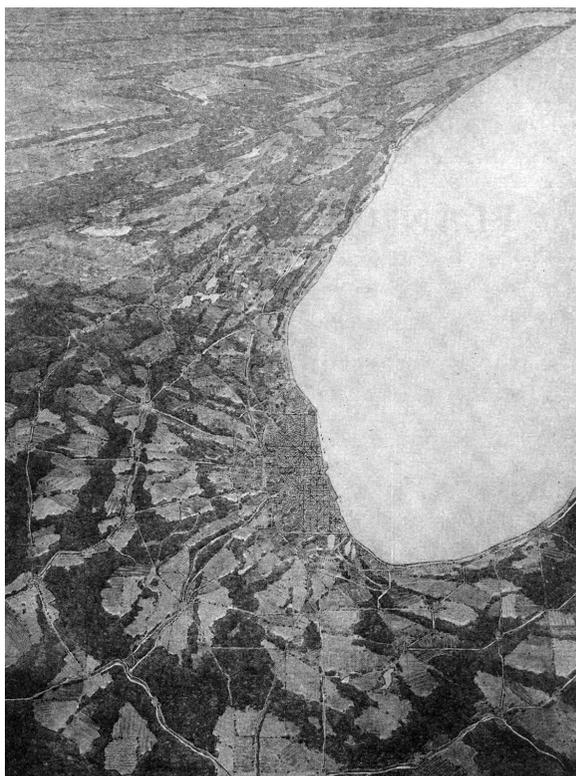


FIGURE 2: Plate 1 from the *Plan of Chicago* (1909):
Chicago in regional context with surrounding landscape and towns

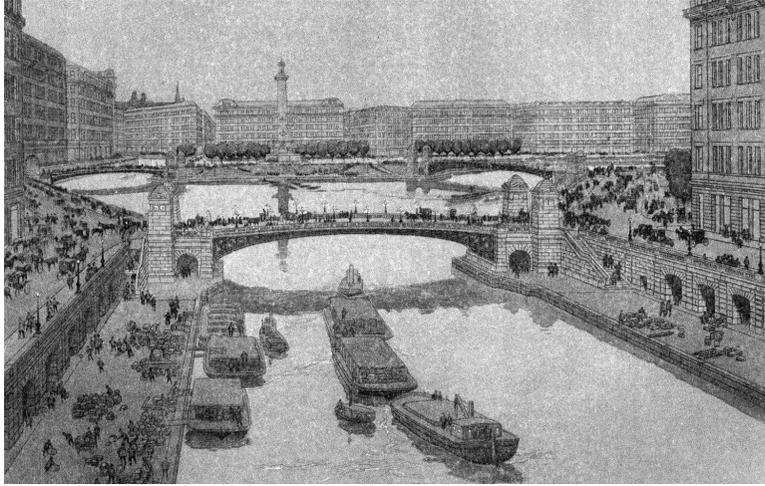


FIGURE 3: Plate 107 from the *Plan of Chicago*, showing the meeting of the north and south branches of the Chicago River

place where they, their fellow citizens, and their descendants could flourish [FIG.3]. Although the *Plan of Chicago* was sponsored by Chicago businessmen, Burnham envisioned Chicago not simply as a place of commerce but rather as both quotidian and sacramental *home*. Over the course of the twentieth century, Burnham's plan succeeded more in its conservation and lakefront park ambitions than in its civic and regional ambitions. But the *Plan of Chicago* is noteworthy not least because it was arguably the last great planning proposal of the modern era to attempt to bring classical humanist moral and aesthetic sensibilities—the concern for beauty, the concern for home—to bear upon the practical problems of a modern metropolitan region.

The twentieth century successor to classical humanist traditions of architecture and urban design was modernist architecture and city planning, which in Europe began in earnest in the early 1920s immediately after World War I and in America after 1945. Thereafter, modernism quickly became the dominant architecture-and-planning theory throughout the so-called 'first world'; and, with missionary fervor, it came to establish itself globally as a new occupying colonial and imperial power, though the modernists lacked both the self-knowledge and the humane aesthetic ambitions of their antecedent culture. In the United States modernism's most conspicuous fruits were 'urban renewal' and automobile-centered suburban sprawl. But perhaps modernism's most insidious legacy has

been its success in establishing, as a culture-wide habit of both thinking and practice, today's (hyper) modern / utilitarian / emotivist approach to the built environment. As a result, architects today are encouraged to imagine every building as a *sui generis* monument the aesthetic merit of which is determined by the novelty of its form, and the cumulative symbolic effect of which is to represent in city skylines throughout the world the power and extent of global crony capitalism. In spite of a prophetic *cri de coeur* against modernist planning as early as 1961 in Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, modernism remains to this day modernity's default form of human settlement-making, notwithstanding organized opposition that began in earnest with the founding of The Congress for the New Urbanism in the early 1990s—a counter-attack joined more recently by the Front Porch Republic, not on the CNU battlefields of real estate development, transportation policy and climate change, but rather on the fronts of environmental stewardship, human nature, and human flourishing. Let me return therefore to the questions with which I began: Can human flourishing—the life of moral and intellectual excellence lived in community with others—occur in a modern metropolitan environment [FIG.4]? And can a modern metropolis be (re)conceived as a range of less-dense-rural-to-more-dense-urban settlements that cumulatively, at the scale of a metropolitan region, attain the local intimacy, formal legibility, and densities of human capital that have historically made cities both central to the dynamics of human achievement, discovery, and excellence, *and* as beautiful places that feel like and anticipate home?

To these questions *The Notre Dame Plan of Chicago 2109* (hereafter *Chicago 2109*) offers a confident affirmative answer. *Chicago 2109* is both a critique of contemporary Chicago and a proposal to further develop ideas and forms already deeply embedded in both the history of Chicago and a larger history of which Chicago is part. It employs classical humanist urbanism and Catholic social teaching generally, and the 1909 *Plan of Chicago* specifically, as reference points for imagining Chicago a century forward and reconceiving it as an example of a humanist alternative to today's allegedly inevitable hyper-modern high-rise post-humanist global urbanism. *Chicago 2109* envisions a metropolitan Chicago population 3.5 times denser, and a city of Chicago population about 35% denser, than they are today (while still being only 43% as dense as present-day Brooklyn and only 28% as dense as present-day Paris). Among the benefits of Chicago's increased density would be a more active and intentional

THE WORLD'S POPULATION, CONCENTRATED

If the world's 6.9 billion people lived in one city, how large would that city be if it were as dense as...

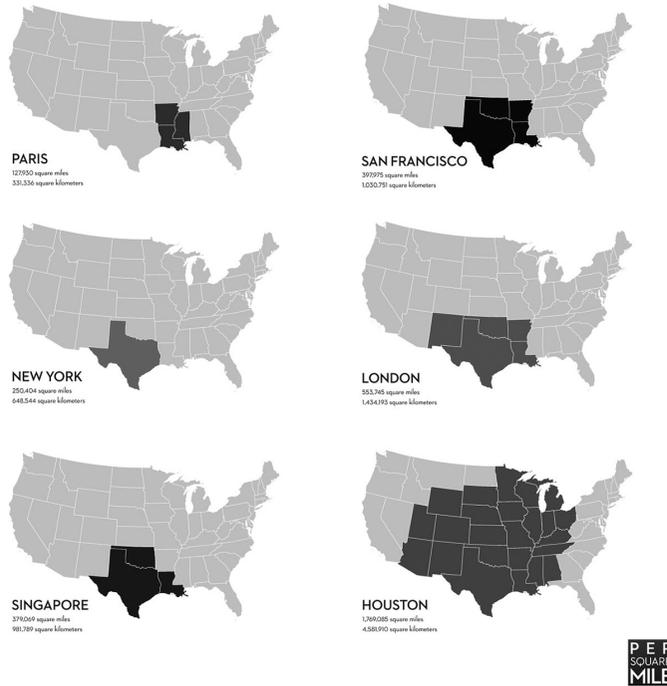


FIGURE 4:

World population and the amount of land it would occupy at the density of various international cities, from persquaremile.com (n.b. this does not illustrate the amount of additional land necessary to sustain a world population at these densities)

relationship to metropolitan Chicago's immediate landscape [FIG.5]: the recovery in metropolitan Chicago of more than 70% of currently developed land and its reversion to water-permeable agricultural land, forests, prairie, and wetlands; as well as a tripling of the amount of open land in the city of Chicago itself. Moreover, this imagined increase in population and building density can be accomplished by taking advantage of Chicago's existing public transportation infrastructure, in a range of densities and residential building types, and without the need for high-rises.

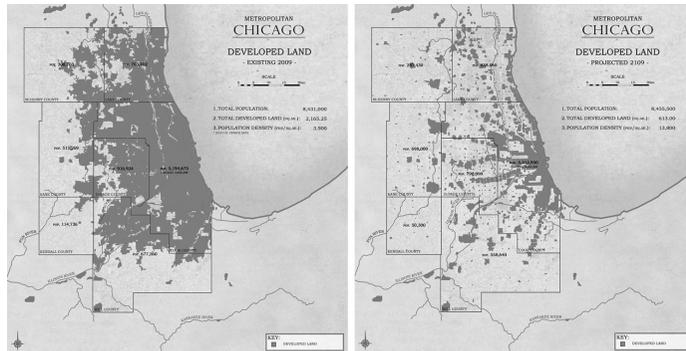


FIGURE 5: *Left:* Existing Metro Chicago 2009: 8.5M people occupying 2100+ square miles at 3900 / sq. mile (11 500 / sq. mile in Chicago)
Right: Proposed Metro Chicago 2109: 8.5M people occupying 600+ sq. miles at 13800 / sq. mile (15500 / sq. mile in Chicago)

Central to *Chicago 2109* is the designation of four identifiable less-dense-to-more-dense settlement types defined according to both density and area [FIGS.6 & 7]. These are the more rural settlements of the Hamlet and the Village, and the more urban settlements of the Town and the City—the latter comprised of neighborhoods, themselves defined in *Chicago 2109* in part by their proximity to public transit stops. Each of these settlement types is compact and includes a mix of commercial, residential and civic uses. In *Chicago 2109*, hamlets and villages exist



FIGURE 6: Hamlet / Village / Town / City as rural-to-urban settlement types defined by population density and land area

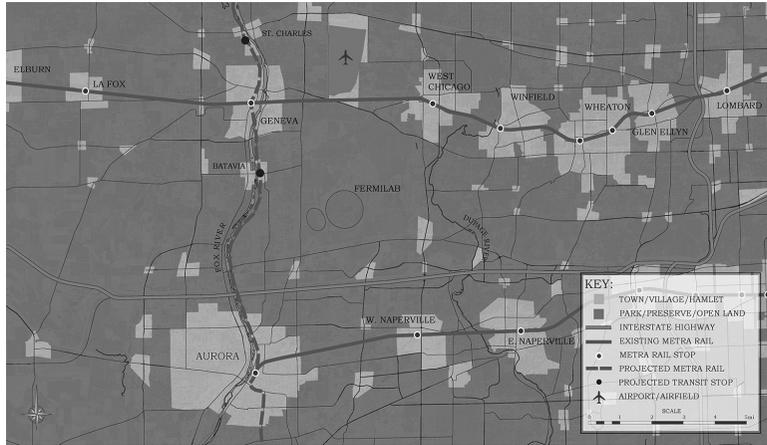


FIGURE 7: Western Metropolitan Chicago, with City of Aurora and various Towns located around commuter rail lines. Villages and Hamlets are located at intersections of major state and regional roads, surrounded by natural or agrarian landscape

at the edge or crossing of state and/or county roads, and are *surrounded* by either a natural or agricultural landscape, with which they presumably have some working relationship [FIG.8], whereas towns—larger and denser settlements organized in relationship to rail transit—have a natural or agricultural landscape *at their edge*.

In order to work in a metropolitan context (and in contrast to post-1945 suburbs), each rural and urban settlement type requires—in proximity to commercial, religious, and civic buildings and spaces—a

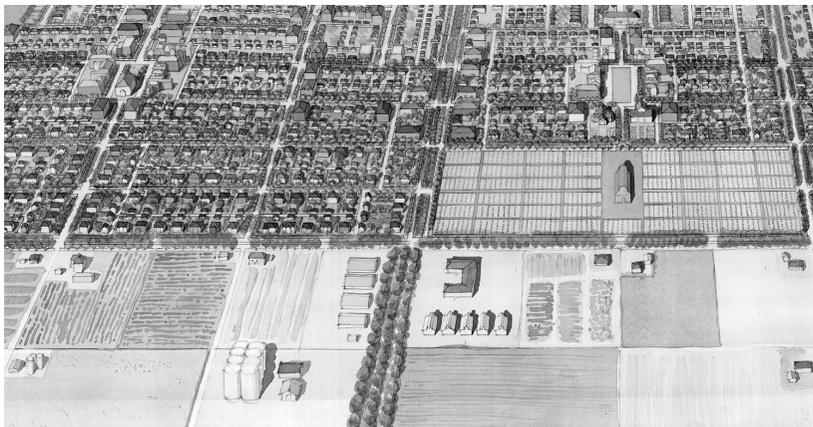


FIGURE 8: Town settlement meets agricultural landscape in metropolitan Chicago



FIGURE 9: Chicago's historic center viewed from the southwest, 2109

variety of residential building types suited for persons in different stages of life: young children, teen-agers, young adults, working families, and retirees. This was the pre-1945 historical norm, and it can work again if Chicagoans will study, learn from, and improve the unusually good mix



FIGURE 10: Proposed new high-rise city hall and boulevard fronted by sacred buildings, a crossing of civic and sacred axes to replace the freeway interchange in Chicago's historic center

of neighborhood housing types developed locally prior to 1930: detached single-family houses large and small (some with front porches), owner-occupied two- and three-flat buildings, six-flat buildings, twelve-unit

corner apartment buildings, the three story U-court walk-up, and the mid-rise apartment / condominium building. The highest residential densities envisioned in *Chicago 2109* can be accomplished humanely in buildings of six stories or fewer [FIG.9], allowing for taller residential buildings on Chicago's lakefront, but leaving it to individual neighborhoods to regulate building heights in a regional Land Value Tax regime (see below).

But what of Chicago as a historic city of high-rise buildings? *Chicago 2109* proposes no high-rise demolition, but does envision an economy and cultural sensibility in which tall buildings will be preserved and maintained to the degree they are *well built* and, above all, *loved*. New tall buildings may even be built, most likely for important civic structures [FIG.10]. However, in Chicago imagined as a classical humanist city—both by Daniel Burnham in 1909, and in *Chicago 2109*—high-rise buildings are not normative. What of the alleged environmental benefits of high-rise buildings, and the need for higher urban population densities to affect better stewardship of land? It is true that higher-than-present densities have environmental benefits, but not true that density can only be satisfied by high-rises. Paris, a city of six-story buildings, is almost four times denser than the city depicted in *Chicago 2109*, and Paris does not have the lower-density, predominantly single-family residential building-types that would be most characteristic of the metropolitan regional settlement pattern of hamlets, villages, towns, and city neighborhoods envisioned in *Chicago 2109*—which *also* means, n.b., that if and when the time comes, metropolitan Chicago has the capacity for substantial population growth within the patterns of land use shown in *Chicago 2109*.

Like the anticipated decline and demise of unloved and poorly built high-rise housing and office buildings, the anticipated decline and demise of Chicago's post-1945 suburbs and their restoration as rural land is *not* an active policy proposal to shut down suburbs. Rather, the decline of suburbia seems the likely unfolding of fixed near-term demographic events—specifically, aging Boomers and late-procreating Millennials—and their slow-growth or contracting economic consequences.

In tandem with increasing awareness of both the economic and environmental costs of low-density suburbs, *Chicago 2109* depicts a future in which both small-town and big-city urbanism *and* landscape recovery and restoration have become pro-active public policy. Similarly, although *Chicago 2109* indicates that driving will be less common than it now is because the high infrastructure maintenance costs of low-density suburbs will ultimately render their form economically obsolete, the elimination

of automobiles as conveniences is neither presumed by nor essential to *Chicago 2109*. What *is* essential is intelligent land-use coordinated with *existing* but improved public transportation and, probably, a revision of current land taxation policy. The latter especially is easier said than done; but insofar as justice is an element of human flourishing, and even though a revised tax policy is insufficient to secure human flourishing in metropolitan Chicago, such revision does seem necessary. The failure of metropolitan Chicago's current city and regional political institutions to live within their means parallels similar failures at the state and national levels; and the growing inequalities of opportunity that these failures foster, and their economic unsustainability as policy, make land tax reform at the regional level a potent political issue. There is not space here to explore the subject in depth, but one possible solution—in the best traditions of American federalist experiments in self-government, and arguably best employed at the level of the local metropolitan region—is a Land Value Tax that eliminates all other regional taxes in favor of a tax on land *regardless of its improvements or lack thereof*. This theory of taxation (most often associated with nineteenth-century social theorist Henry George, and endorsed by modern economists ranging from Paul Krugman to Milton Friedman) has appeal across the political spectrum because on the one hand it “socializes” land (a finite common good) and on the other hand removes disincentives to for-profit private development. Employed on a regional metropolitan basis, a Land Value Tax has the potential simultaneously to discourage private sector land-banking, encourage development, and spread more equally both the benefits and the costs of externalities associated with human settlement.

What kind of governmental structure is implied by *Chicago 2109*? In recognizing the social principles of the dignity of the individual person, communal solidarity, and subsidiarity, and in keeping with American traditions of democratic self-governance, *Chicago 2109* presumes two levels of political organization below (and, in the event of some crisis or emergency, perhaps independent of) state and national government. One is the *metropolitan region* (in this case the existing seven counties of northeastern Illinois); the other is *local political communities of place* as found in hamlets, villages, towns, and city neighborhoods. All of these would be funded by the same metropolis-wide Land Value Tax. Local governments would bear responsibility for developing their own local design development guidelines (including local zoning and street design codes), providing public safety, street and sanitation services, maintaining public

parks, and articulating and enforcing (as required) communal norms within some larger constitutional framework of individual rights. Metropolitan government would be responsible for overseeing regional land use (including nature preserves and ag-land), water treatment, watershed protection, waste management, public transportation, major road (not federal interstate highway) infrastructure, and funding for elementary and secondary education (however defined and delivered). All of these issues are important to the well-being of the entire metropolitan region, and are both manageable and most equitably addressed *at a regional scale*, whereas in contemporary metropolitan Chicago they are now overseen by multiple agencies in multiple uncoordinated jurisdictions that operate in no small part as sources of patronage and fiefdoms of entrenched economic and political power.

What is the likelihood of this political reorganization of metropolitan Chicago? Only time will tell. Some problems cannot be solved by politics, and for such a reorganization to prevail the battles ahead will be both political and cultural. Its most likely alternative—what is in fact now happening—is almost certainly a two-tiered metropolitan Chicago of elite privilege coexisting with increasing poverty. (In the absence of a revived marriage and family ideal and discipline and their positive ripple effects, this circumstance will be cruelly exacerbated among the poor by ongoing modern technological innovations and their effects upon work). In contrast, the twenty-first-century history imagined by and depicted in *Chicago 2109* is one of productive self-governing communities of place anchored in a local landscape. Given present-day metropolitan Chicago's aging population and unfunded pension liabilities, the loss of its households with two biological parents, the pressure on its family structures, its below-replacement-level regional birth-rates and in-migration, general state-wide economic stagnation, and the breakdown of a shared and functional civic and political culture, the metropolis envisioned by *Chicago 2109* represents a cultural and economic revival on the far side of the cultural and economic decline likely to be Chicago's actual immediate future. Nevertheless, its near-term pessimism notwithstanding, *Chicago 2109* has been conceived in hope grounded in Christian anthropology, classical humanism, and American traditions of religious pluralism, local associations, and strong but limited government. Simply and succinctly: if Chicago gets better, it will get better as a consequence of disciplined love exercised by many persons in and for many places—and of disciplined love's hard demands.