Jordan Sayles did not want to go back to his home state of North Carolina, so after graduating from Howard University in the 1930s, he headed for Atlantic City. The New Jersey resort was as familiar as it was different. Reminding him of his southern roots, the movie houses and beaches, restaurants and bars were all segregated. But in contrast to the breadlines snaking through places like Raleigh and Charlotte, the shore town was booming. Hundreds of thousands of people crammed onto the Boardwalk and the beach every weekend. That translated into thousands of jobs. While there were few suitable positions for African American college graduates, there were plenty of opportunities for black men to serve white tourists. Sayles took what was available and started busing tables at the dreamy Moorish-looking Marlborough-Blenheim Hotel. He didn’t get paid much there, so to make ends meet, Sayles took a second job, pushing well-dressed white couples down the Boardwalk on one of the city’s 4,000 steel-wheeled, white wicker, two- and three-passenger rolling chairs. He kept pushing for the next thirty-five years through much of Atlantic City’s reign as the “Queen of Resorts” and the “nation’s playground.”

Not long after retiring, Jordan Sayles sat down to talk with Cynthia Ringe, a local oral historian. By then it was 1978, the casinos were about to open, and the city was long past its heyday. Every morning, it seemed, the local newspaper ran a story about the planned implosion of one of the city’s signature Jazz Age hotels, like the Marlborough-Blenheim. Other accounts told of business closings, foreclosures, and fearless rats taking over abandoned buildings. Just before Sayles taped his recollections, the Federal Bureau of Investigation released its yearly
crime statistics. Atlantic City stood near the very top of the federal agency’s list of the nation’s worst spots for murders, burglaries, and muggings.

Toward the end of the interview, Ringe asked Jordan Sayles why he thought his adopted hometown had fallen on such hard times. He spoke of crime and unsafe streets. Then he told Ringe, “What killed Atlantic City was when they took the pushin’ off [the Boardwalk].” Certainly, as Sayles goes on to explain, the removal of the rolling chairs cost hundreds of African American men their jobs and a chance at a decent living. But the oversized strollers were never simply about added incomes and convenient transportation.¹

Better than the beach, the Boardwalk, the hotels, and the amusement piers, the rolling chairs—those rickshaw-like, wicker baskets on wheels pushed by African American men—captured what the city in its busiest days as a mass resort was all about. Ellie, a hard-boiled, yet still decent, ex-prostitute in a 1978 novel set in Atlantic City, commented:

> People need a place where they can pretend to be something else. They want to believe that if they pretend hard enough, whatever they want to happen will happen. One of my clients used to say that the key to this city was not the beach or the Boardwalk, but in the rolling chairs. You could ride on a rolling chair and dream that you were the kind of person who deserved the rich life.²

Atlantic City, like all mass resorts, manufactured and sold an easily consumed and widely shared fantasy.³ As a setup to the fantasy, city leaders posted confidence builders all over town that made visitors feel safe and secure. Making smart use of ushers and police, bright lights and dress codes, local officials provided white tourists—who made up the overwhelming majority of rolling-chair riders and Boardwalk strollers—with endless chances to act not as they normally did, but as they wanted to be. That’s why people came, and still come, to places like Atlantic City. Walking along the Boardwalk, people pretended, noted one of Atlantic City’s keenest observers, historian and writer Charles Funnell, “to be better than they were.”⁴ During the years before the resort slid into decline, the rolling chairs, as Sayles, Ellie, and Funnell understood, represented the city’s most accessible and visually arresting fantasy. This is where visitors let down their guards and acted out their dreams.

The massive seafood restaurant gave these maps to patrons in the 1940s. Allen “Boo” Pergament Collection (Private Library), Margate, New Jersey.
Once white women and men climbed aboard one of these “temples of contentment,” they caught what the son of a Jewish paint store clerk from Baltimore called “wicker affluence.” “Rolling along on flower[ed] cushions, feet up on the little metal rest, . . . viewing the world without lifting a muscle,” this lower middle-class teenager felt an “ineffable superiority” rise in him. On the chair, he was no longer the son of an overworked, insecure, and bitter father. His wealthy uncle, staying at the swank Shelburne Hotel, no longer made him feel self-conscious about his clothes, his home address, or the jam-packed room without a toilet or shower that his family rented a couple of blocks from the beach. For this one “bewitching” moment, as a black man pushed him down the Boardwalk, he was on top of the world.  

He was a rich man, someone rich enough to afford to pay someone else to carry him from place to place. He was someone to be seen, someone comfortable looking at—even looking down at—others. On the rolling chair, he was transformed into a king, a big man, a real American. Atlantic City’s ability to stage this public performance of racial dominance, conspicuous consumption, class leveling, and social climbing turned the resort into one of the single most popular tourist destinations in America between 1915 and 1965.

With its middle-class crowds and busy Boardwalk, Atlantic City was Disneyland a generation or so before there was a Disneyland. But the city was more than just a harbinger of what was to come. It was, like Disneyland, a place built on a grand deception. Atlantic City was both real and fake, a big city and a small town, a world of soaring skyscrapers and ocean breezes. From the very start, it was conceived as a make-believe place. But this deceit wasn’t disguised. No one mistook Atlantic City for his hometown. This knowledge, this participation in such an easy-to-see masquerade, liberated many. With buildings that looked like churches and sand castles on one side and the windswept beaches on the other, tourists felt comfortable acting richer, sillier, sexier, and friendlier than they did in their day-to-day lives. As long as they felt safe and protected, the middle-class millions came to town to participate in this thrilling illusion and fantasy.

“The Jersey coast,” wrote travel writer Harrison Rhodes in 1915, “is the most popular part of the American seashore, the most characteristic, the most democratic, the most intensely American.” In its red-hot intensity, Atlantic City acted like America on steroids. Along the Boardwalk, the nation’s and its citizens’ best and worst features were exaggerated and bloated. Teddy Roosevelt once said: “A man would not be a good American citizen if he did not know of Atlantic City.” Yet the America that shone so brightly in Atlantic City, like Roosevelt’s own politics cast a mean and contradictory shadow.

Atlantic City, like Disneyland, appealed to middle-class Americans and people who wanted to enter the middle class. Because of its location within easy striking
distance of Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and all of the medium-sized, industrial cities in between and the timing of its reign as the Queen of Resorts, the New Jersey beach town attracted a distinct segment of the middle class. People on their way up made their way to Atlantic City in the first half of the twentieth century. These were men and women for whom, as David Halberstam suggests, the American Dream was about exercising “personal freedom not in social or political terms, but rather in the economic ones.”\(^9\) They were people, like the older characters in Philip Roth’s masterful novel set in New Jersey, American Pastoral, “in love” with their “own good luck” of having landed in the United States.\(^10\) One-time outsiders, these children of immigrant ditch diggers and steel workers felt they had made it in America and into the middle class, and they showed off their newfound inclusion in this national community based on comfort, conformity, and consumption—even more than on citizenship—by coming to Atlantic City.\(^11\)

In August 1921, only a month before the very first Miss America Pageant, California senator Hiram Johnson and his wife caught a glimpse of these newly minted middle-class families on parade. Trying to escape the sullen heat of summer in Washington, D.C., they checked into the Ritz Carlton Hotel, where they had “everything possible for our convenience and comfort.” The Boardwalk, however, offered “a vastly different” experience. Crowds filled the walkway to the bursting point. Yet it was the makeup of the throng more than its size that bothered the lawmaker. “On Labor Day,” he wrote, “it was estimated that 350,000 people were in Atlantic City. If this estimate was correct, I am perfectly certain that 249,000 of them were the chosen people. Everywhere, and in everything, the Israelite predominates.” He even found a few Jews in the Ritz lobby and dining room, but he explained, “They are the sort that we know, the rich, assertive, self-sufficient.” Farther down the Boardwalk, he ran into other Jews: “the short, swarthy men, the squatty, dumpy women, and the innumerable daughters, at an early age bursting into overblown maturity.” In these parts of Atlantic City, the senator felt like “a stranger almost in a strange land.”\(^12\)

But it was not just well-dressed and swarthy Jews who made up the Boardwalk crowds. There were Greeks and Irish, Italians and Slovaks, even a few Protestants on the promenade as well. Atlantic City drew its visitors from ethnic neighborhoods and crabgrass frontiers, from places populated by people who had, often just recently, made enough money to take a few days off from work, buy some dress-up clothes, and pay to have someone cook for them and push them around in rolling chairs. Johnson’s strangers were really the newest recruits to the nation’s burgeoning middle class.\(^13\)

Behind the Boardwalk and the beach, a town, and then a small city, grew in Atlantic City to meet the needs and desires of the women and men who served the
tourists. Physically, Atlantic City looked like one of those places that today's new urbanists, with their fondness for yesterday's lost city, are busy trying to recreate. It had a bustling downtown, neighborhoods with sidewalks and corner stores, houses with front stoops and garages in the back, and affordable public transportation tying this urban world together.

By the 1970s, the rolling chairs, as Sayles pointed out, were gone, and the city's traditional neighborhoods were crumbling. Atlantic City business and political leaders had by this time lost their ability to manufacture the safe fantasy of racial ascendancy and easy social mobility—a fantasy that had depended on a large supply of underpaid African American workers and control over access to the Boardwalk, downtown stores, movie houses, the beach, and all other public places. Once things changed, the neatly dressed families who had for years spent their summer vacations at the colossal Boardwalk hotels and in cramped neighborhood rooming houses bolted town to consume new fantasies in Disneyland—the fantasy there was of long-lost, safe public spaces—and Las Vegas, where the fantasy sold on the strip was of indulgence and chance.

Eventually, the crowds came back to Atlantic City, or at least to one of the twelve casinos that today tower over the Boardwalk and the salt marshes a couple of miles away. Yet despite providing 43,924 jobs (almost 15,000 more jobs than Atlantic City's total population), $6 billion in investment (more than the total investment in New Jersey's four other major cities combined over the last quarter century), and even more in taxes (the casinos have paid $5.5 billion to the state and currently contribute 80 percent of the city's total property taxes), the gaming industry has not saved Atlantic City. In many ways, the city as a place to live is now worse than ever. Although 35 million people visit the Boardwalk and the casinos each year, the city's main street is all but dead and the neighborhoods are in critical condition. There is no place in the gaming city to see a movie or buy a computer. Until 1996, there wasn't even a supermarket. Metal detectors, steel bars, and a small team of security officers now protect the Thriftway, which sits downtown behind a suburban-style parking lot.

The story of Atlantic City's life, near-death, and recent reincarnation is the story I will tell in this book. This could be a tragic, nostalgia-filled tale of the breakdown of a glorious city and of its reemergence as a gilded gambling capital. But as the rolling-chair ride suggests, that perspective would celebrate, at least implicitly, segregation and Gone with the Wind—style race relations. There is, therefore, another story to tell; this one is about Atlantic City and the making of the nation's urban spaces. The main characters in this narrative are the tourist entrepreneurs—the pier owners, hotel architects, casino managers, and rolling-chair operators—and the white middle-class millions they tried to lure to town.
When mass culture and mass resorts catch on with their target audience, it is, as historian of the middle class Loren Baritz points out, “an obviously useful clue about what is on the people’s mind.” Atlantic City functioned like all mass resorts—indeed, all products of mass culture—do. It prospered as long as it soothed the anxieties and stirred the desires of its audience. When it didn’t, it struggled to survive.

Dressed in their mink coats and sharply pleated linen pants, white middle-class women and men flooded into town from the 1910s to the 1960s. After that, they abandoned the city. Why? What did the Boardwalk millions get in Atlantic City (and on the rolling chairs) before 1965? Why couldn’t Atlantic City keep giving them what they wanted after that? What can we learn about these people—these Americans—from this disappearing act, this white flight of tourists and then residents? Just as important, why did some of them and their children come back to the gaming city? The answers to these questions tell us much about our cities and the nation and about how the vast middle class imagined and practiced democracy on a day-to-day basis.

The white middle-class millions of the much-revered “greatest generation” and beyond were people who equated making it in America with climbing up the economic ladder. At the same time, they were people who thrilled at being pushed down the Boardwalk by African American men. They were people who valued exclusion ahead of inclusion, status before equality, and walled-off public spaces over truly open ones. Few, it seems, had an expansive notion of democratic space. Although they might have objected to legal, southern-style segregation, when it came to public spaces—their public spaces—they demanded exclusion. Most, in fact, saw the democracy of the streets as finite. With only a fixed amount of space to go around, they clung to what they had. Rather than share the social and cultural benefits of democracy with others, they hoarded as much as they could, and that included the wonders of the Boardwalk and the street life of their neighborhoods. Purged of nostalgia, the story of Atlantic City’s glory days is, then, a story about the possibilities and limits of American democracy. And the city’s present follows a similar pattern. Exclusion, updated and tailored to fit the shifting desires of the middle class, remains crucial to the casino city. Understanding this resort and its history, therefore, means seeing how millions of individual decisions about inclusion and exclusion, which together trace the outlines of the collective consciousness of the middle class, shaped and continue to shape urban America and its public spaces.

Moving chronologically from World War I to the present, Boardwalk of Dreams will explore how middle-class notions of space, race, and democracy sustained
Atlantic City’s boom times, fueled its sharp decline, and have molded its awkward comeback as a casino town over the last twenty-five years. The first three chapters look at how the city worked and functioned as a place to live and visit and how the public was constituted during most of the early years (1915–1960), when African American men pushed well-dressed couples up and down the Boardwalk. This section moves through space rather than time. It starts on the Boardwalk with pictures of the elaborate built environment on one side and the natural world on the other. After that, the narrative tours the city’s once-vibrant entertainment zones and back lots, including the “black and tan” nightclubs, gay bars, and sex shows. From there, it goes on a drive through several of the city’s racially and ethnically defined neighborhoods. Next, chapters 4 through 7 examine from different angles the desegregation of public spaces downtown and on the Boardwalk and the years of painful decline that followed (1955–1978). Along the way, this volume looks at how middle-class couples and families, city planners, tourism officials, investment bankers, gay vacationers, hippies, and African American and Puerto Rican residents came to terms with and talked about the city’s fall from the top of the list of the nation’s favorite tourist spots. Finally, the book probes the jarring juxtaposition of Atlantic City’s present (from 1978 on) with its millions of yearly visitors and hulking neon-decorated casino towers and its scarred urban landscape and impoverished public realm within shouting distance of the gaming palaces.

On the surface, the plot line for Boardwalk of Dreams may seem obvious. For much of the first half of the last century, as Jordan Sayles pushed people down the Boardwalk, Atlantic City reigned as the Queen of Resorts and the “nation’s playground.” It hosted tens of millions of people each year. Its hotels were the largest in the world, and it was home to the world’s longest boardwalk, the only one spelled with a capital B. It was where the Miss America Pageant and saltwater taffy were invented. It was where Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin first got together and where other members of the Rat Pack honed their acts before heading to Las Vegas. And it is from the streets of Atlantic City, finally, that the board game Monopoly took its property names.

By the late 1960s, Atlantic City had earned a new sort of renown. The city had become a poster child for urban blight and decay. Journalists dubbed it the “Bronx by the Bay” and compared it to bombed-out Dresden and war-torn Beirut. By the decade’s end, comedians had folded the city’s downfall into their stand-up routines. “This town really swings,” one performer quipped in 1970. “Every Friday night we shop till 10 at the supermarket.” When someone asked him what had happened to all the action, the comedian cracked, “Are you kidding? Listen, the typical couple visiting Atlantic City these days is a very, very old
lady . . . and her mother."18 A few months later, a local police officer sneered: "This town has had it. All you got on the Boardwalk are old folks, niggers, and hippies."19

With the local economy at rock bottom, casino gambling came to town, bringing back the crowds and even the Rat Pack to the Boardwalk. In the middle of the 1990s, more people visited Atlantic City each year than any other place in the United States—more than Disneyland or Dollywood or even Las Vegas. But the couples and families, senior citizens and college students who come to town now don't stay for a week or a month, and they don't parade up and down the Boardwalk in their flashiest clothes like people did in the old days. They arrive by bus or car, pull into a parking garage, gamble, and escape—usually six hours later, or sooner if their money runs out. So despite all the money changing hands on the Boardwalk—the casinos have won $67.9 billion since the first one opened in May 1978—Atlantic City now represents one of the country's starkest versions of the tale of two cities.20 Within a few short blocks of Donald Trump's gaudy and gilded showplace, the Taj Mahal, are some of the loneliest, most desolate streets in all of America.21

At first glance, this would seem like the typical "declension" narrative that dominates urban studies.22 It looks like, and is, a story of urban decay, white flight, the rise of the suburbs, and the use of quick fixes, like gambling, to solve deep and vexing economic and social problems. But by focusing on the white middle class and its ideas about urban space, the Atlantic City story contains a twist. There is, it turns out, a strong thread of continuity running through Atlantic City's apparent roller-coaster history.

When Atlantic City reigned as the nation's playground, it was, to quote the new urbanist barnstormer James Howard Kunstler, "one of [the] nation's great public spaces."23 Its busiest days coincided with an earlier era when middle-class women and men spent evenings chatting with neighbors and passersby on their front porches and nights out on the town dancing, drinking, and watching movies. During these days, people consumed their leisure in front of huge crowds of strangers, not at home in front of wide screen televisions or at some bland suburban multiplex. Across the country, the desire for the public consumption of leisure turned the public entertainment industry into big business. Whole sections of cities, like New York's Times Square and Atlanta's Five Points, developed and thrived on serving the public what it desired in public, in front of crowds of strangers. Atlantic City was like these places, but fundamentally different. Anticipating Las Vegas and the transformation of urban areas from manufacturing centers to playgrounds, it was the first city in the country built from scratch and devoted entirely to the production and public consumption of entertainment.24
Crowded Boardwalk, 1920s

Probably from the Easter Day Parade, this photograph shows just how many well-dressed people crammed onto the Boardwalk on a busy weekend (Atlantic City Free Public Library, Heston Room, Atlantic City, New Jersey).

Contemporary commentators from Andres Duany to Ray Suarez to Michael Sorkin lament the decline of the “public” sphere in America. Too many of us, they complain, have fled the old neighborhood’s front stoops and downtown’s bright nights for the dull predictability of suburban backyards and featureless malls. Along the way, we have, we are told, tossed aside the vital day-to-day interactions of the street that oil our democracy. According to these new urbanist thinkers, buildings, design, and planning made this older world work. Their answer to today’s problems, then, is to return to the past, to the lost city of sidewalks and window-shopping, corner stores and showy movie theaters. Atlantic City had all of these elements of urban life. But in Atlantic City, the public spaces of the past—the world of the Boardwalk, the rolling chair, downtown department stores, and tight-knit neighborhoods—was never about democracy; it was about exclusion. Moving up required stepping over others. Yet the idea of social mobility provided exclusion with a cloak of democracy. Atlantic City boosters con-
stantly talked about their town as a place where the rich rubbed elbows with the middling and poor, creating a melting pot of united Americans. During Atlantic City’s much revered heyday from World War I to the middle of the 1960s, the resort was, however, in the words of an Athens, Georgia, native who grew up in the Boardwalk’s shadow, a “Jim Crow town for sure.” As Jordan Sayles quickly learned, African American tourists were kept off the Boardwalk, away from all but one beach area, and confined to the crow’s nests of the movie theaters. Local practices, at the same time, confined black residents to a virtually all-black, overcrowded, and underserviced neighborhood away from the Boardwalk. Then the world changed.

The civil rights movement made Atlantic City’s street corners and hotel lobbies, taverns and movie houses open to just about anyone and thus more democratic. In fact, the Boardwalk, the nightclubs, and the city neighborhoods behind them became too democratic for most middle-class Americans. Worried that public space was now unmanageable and out of control, the accountants and clerks who had in the past spent their summers in town opted for self-containment. They went into hiding in segregated suburbs, malls, movie theaters, amusement parks, and outdoor worlds. Fears of criminals, rioters, and militants drove the last few middle-class white people left downtown out of these dense urban spaces in the late 1960s. In their leisure time and in their neighborhoods, these families on the run didn’t ask for explicit performances of racial deference and superiority any more; they didn’t fantasize about being pushed down the Boardwalk by happy African American servants. They showed off their middle-class status in other ways, including by abandoning the city. When it came to organizing their new worlds away from the cities, they wanted to seal people of color off in their own spaces, as far away from them as possible. But they wanted to do this without calling attention to the new way of carving up public space. So they tolerated a handful of well-behaved Others on their streets and at their malls. That way, they could say to themselves and anyone who asked that the sorting of people along race and class lines was natural; it just happened that they lived in virtually all-white neighborhoods, sent their kids to virtually all-white schools, and vacationed in virtually all-white theme parks.

At the same time, civil rights battles and postwar prosperity lifted many, although not all, African Americans out of poverty. Like the European immigrants and others who climbed the economic ladder before them, they brought their hopes and dreams to Atlantic City. They came to swim in the ocean, spin around on the rides, and listen to the singers and horn players. They came to act rich, eat fancy meals, and escape the grind of their day-to-day lives. With African Americans on the Boardwalk, and even in the rolling chairs, many white salesmen,
plumbers, pencil manufacturers, and homemakers bypassed Atlantic City in favor of newer, cleaner, more exclusive resorts. As the white tourists stayed away, fancy Boardwalk jewelry stores turned into hot dog stands; expensive auction houses became sleazy jam joints; and downtown movie theaters were torn down and replaced by parking lots. As the city became more honky-tonk than classy, black tourists started to stay away as well. By the 1970s, locals quipped that you could roll a bowling ball down the Boardwalk in the middle of the summer without hitting anyone. Others joked, “Would the last person out of town please turn off the lights?”

Over the last couple of decades, the middle class has trickled back into Atlantic City. But they haven’t returned to neighborhood taverns or downtown clothing stores. They have gone to the casinos, highly regulated and heavily policed places that are set off from the city. The irony is that these guarded and gated places are in many ways more integrated than the exclusive city of the past.

Race was Atlantic City’s primary and most important form of exclusion, but movie theater ushers and Boardwalk policemen made sure that others—those not properly dressed or too loud or too crude—were kept away as well. Creating the public’s entertainment during most of the twentieth century, therefore, required keeping undesirables and the poor at a distance—although not entirely out of sight, since someone had to push the rolling chairs. When city leaders couldn’t contain the Other in Jim Crow roles and separate neighborhoods, the middle-class millions left the city behind, segregating themselves in the suburbs and suburban-style resorts.

Atlantic City’s halcyon days and hard times highlight two key moments, not just in the city’s past, but also in the nation’s urban past. The classic period of the busy, fashionable Boardwalk points to the widespread appeal of racialized versions of the American Dream during the last century when an essentially segregated Atlantic City stood as the nation’s most popular middle-class resort and just about every major performer in the country from Bob Hope to Sammy Davis, Jr., to Bing Crosby got his start in blackface. The city’s demise, meanwhile, underscores the awesome scope of the urban crisis and mass exodus to the suburbs of the 1960s and 1970s. No urban place, not even a beach town, was left untouched by the fears and anxieties of this riotous moment and great American moving frenzy.

Charting these two time periods and what they represent means investigating the changing strategies of tourist entrepreneurs and the shifting tastes of middle-class vacationers, the collapse of main street and the downtown public entertainment industry, and the emergence of the mall and the appeal of mall-like places as models for urban renewal. Atlantic City’s past brings to light, moreover, changing
patterns of government and private investment that together funneled money away from the cities and toward the suburbs. But none of this has wiped away the central importance of continuity to this story. Access to public space was, in the eyes of middle-class America, never supposed to be inclusive. Only through exclusion could the public take shape. Most middling women and men imagined this public space as bringing together like-minded, racially and economically similar strangers. Once Atlantic City, and other cities, couldn’t legally exclude, the people from the middle left. But they came back when Disney and the Donald—Trump, that is—came to town, highlighting a third moment in the nation’s urban history.28

Exclusion remains the key to the Disneyesque rebirth of urban tourism at the Jersey shore and across the country in the last quarter century. Atlantic City’s demise—situated as it was between two moments of exclusion—coincides not just with the desegregation of the city’s public spaces, but also with the opening of Disneyland in Anaheim, California, in 1955. Within a decade, Disneyland had replaced Atlantic City as the nation’s most popular middle-class resort. Disney achieved this preeminent position through control—through the use of gates, high ticket prices, carefully designed advertising strategies, security officers, grooming codes for employees, and its ex-urban location beyond the city and the reach of public transportation. Behind its thick fortress walls, Disney created a public sphere, much like the Boardwalk, the shopping mall, and later the casino, based on the economically viable principles of exclusion mixed with the illusion of equal access and democracy. Disneyland, in fact, copied from, learned from, and updated Atlantic City by creating an exclusive public space made to fit the changing ideas of the postwar, post–civil rights era. In this new urban world, the middle class didn’t show off in public. Unlike their parents riding proudly down the Boardwalk in Jordan Sayles’s rolling chair, they didn’t use their leisure time to make public performances out of racial and class privileges. Instead, they tried to cover up and deny the significance of their race and class advantages.29

Once the neon gaming halls landed on the Boardwalk, the copying went in the other direction. In the past, Disney had borrowed from Atlantic City, but beginning in 1978, the city’s tourist entrepreneurs took from the theme park. With the coming of the slot machines and green felt tables, local leaders essentially turned the city over to casino executives, letting them serve as urban planners. Like their counterparts in charge of remaking beleaguered urban areas across the country, Harrah’s and Trump executives borrowed heavily from Disney’s scripts and designs. Through rigorous control over the crowd, elaborate surveillance, and defensive architectural codes, Atlantic City’s gaming directors manufactured a new kind of public realm built around the containment of the urban—read: unsafe—
world and the fantasy of getting something for nothing, and throwing everyday norms of behavior out the window. The numbers speak for themselves. Twice the population of metropolitan New York comes to Atlantic City each year, and they wager almost enough money to fund the nation’s space program. Obviously, the casino managers are doing something right, at least when it comes to drawing free-spending crowds to town, even if they have failed to bring back much life to the city’s downtown and traditional neighborhoods.

Paul Goldberger, Kenneth Jackson, Robert Putnam, Robert Goodman, and other current commentators and scholars complain that the entire world is a mall, or even worse a casino, and that we are all sadly bowling alone.30 Several of these scholars suggest that we are the buildings around us; windows and lobbies, sidewalks and doors make us who we are. In the past, according to these narratives, we lived in a world filled with more authentic and meaningful spaces, more inspiring architecture, and better urban design. As a result of this built environment, urban life back then was more democratic. Now the critics of our Disneyesque cities proclaim: public space is dead! Yet this lament, usually without intending to, romanticizes the past. Again, based on the Atlantic City story, the much-revered public experiences of going downtown or hanging out on the front stoop was just as unreal, just as exclusionary, and just as contrived as the Disneyland public experience of today. The public space of the past is largely a myth, an illusion. The public in America has always been segregated and walled off. What has changed is the way segregation is produced and the size, dimension, and height of the walls surrounding its protected places. What hasn’t changed is the fact that only when there are clearly marked walls does the great middle-class public take shape. Attitudes about space, therefore, not space itself, defined and continue to define our cities. This rather relentless continuity holds the key to understanding Atlantic City’s jazzy past, its bitter demise, and its vexing present as a money-making casino town without much town left.

A few years ago, a Web site called Atlantic City Memory Lane was started. Almost every day, yesterday’s visitors to and residents of the city write in and recount their memories of bygone days on the streets, beach, and Boardwalk. One contributor, Nick Geiger, recalled “walking down the boardwalk, or Atlantic Ave. during the holidays, and just knowing almost everyone.” A Las Vegas man who grew up in Atlantic City chimed in with sweet reminiscences of the “sounds of delivery trucks in the morning.”31 Others tell of first kisses, chance meetings with Frank Sinatra, shaking hands with Mr. Peanut on the Boardwalk, and buying cool Nutty Buddies on hot beach days from Singing Sam the Ice Cream Man. The home page, at first, featured a 1950s photograph of a white couple riding in a rolling chair. Someone, however, had airbrushed out the pusher. That’s not where
the erasures end, however. On-line correspondents regularly talk about why their city went into decline. They point to cheap airfares and air conditioning, bad press coverage and the spread of television. But they do not talk about their own actions, their own retreats from the city. When it comes to the Boardwalk of today, they see only misty visions of a gold-hewed yesterday. The perfection of those dress-up nights fifty and sixty years ago makes clear the shortcomings of the casino city. "We use[d] to have such fun down there," writes a Bristol, Pennsylvania, man who loved the diving horse. "I only wished that my own son could have had the fun times there that I did. But now it[']s all casinos and so different. He goes and likes it, but to me it[']s just not the same. Those are my wonderful memories of AC."

This erasure of the meanness of the past and the walling off of public space is not that different from what goes on in current urban studies and urban planning. While there are innumerable books on the decline of American cities and the need for neotraditional designs to save them, they are frequently nostalgic, if only in subtle ways, for an urban past that we all too often forget was defined and shaped by exclusion. Keeping some people out because of how they looked or acted was not just an unfortunate aspect of these places; it was what made them public places to begin with. Boardwalk of Dreams challenges this thinking. The Atlantic City story told here makes clear that the solutions to our urban ills must be found in the future, not the past, and that the remedies we come up with must confront the taint of exclusion at the very core of middle-class notions of democracy and public space.
In 1920, Bruce Bliven, a writer for the *New Republic*, came to Atlantic City. The visit changed his understanding of the nation. "When Americans dream of that perfect society which is some day to be," he asked, "what form does their imagining take?" He answered, "Atlantic City, New Jersey . . . obviously." The resort, he insisted, served as a testament to the "sturdy middle-class millions." It was a fantasy of their ideal world. "If you would know the best that the American bourgeoisie has thus far been able to dream," Bliven insisted, "then, come to Atlantic City and behold." After just ten minutes on the Boardwalk mingling with the crowd of "well-dressed, good-looking" people, he crowned Atlantic City "the American Utopia."

Something of a Menckenesque elitist, Bliven held his tongue in his cheek as he made this declaration. He joked that none of the city's newsstands carried the *New Republic*. When he asked a bookstore clerk for a couple of well-known non-fiction titles, he was told, "We don't keep none of them. . . . They ain't no call for 'em." He did find plenty of "Filthy Stories, Undressed Stories, Naughty Tales and the like" on the shelves of the city's four bookstores. These, he guessed, must be what utopians wanted when they were on vacation. They weren't what he wanted to read, but he didn't doubt for a moment the merchants' wisdom. Atlantic City, he surmised, was a place that thrived on giving the "public"—that is, the "American bourgeoisie"—"What . . . [It] Wants."

From before World War I to after World War II, the glory days of Atlantic City and of urban America in general, the Boardwalk reigned as a middle-class "American Utopia," because as Bliven learned, it gave salesmen from Baltimore and plant managers from Reading what they wanted. What they wanted was a safe
and comfortable place where there was no poverty and where they could show off by imitating the rich. Visitors looked to spend money only, as Bliven observed, “where it shows.” Everyone, he noticed, dressed in “new and smart” clothes and devoured meals with a “fearful variety of dishes.” “We Utopians,” Bliven announced, “overeat enormously.” Following multicourse dinners served with silver utensils on white linen tablecloths by doting tuxedoed waiters, some utopians strolled down the Boardwalk. The most committed utopians, however, hired Jordan Sayles or another black man to push them toward no particular destination in a rolling chair. “Though Atlantic City is technically a health resort . . . some of us,” Bliven explained, “ride in wheeled chairs, but we do so as a sensuous experiment, not from infirmity. Indeed, we sit erect with such an air of almost belligerent health as to prove to every observer that we ride merely because we have the dollar.”

The showing off didn’t end with the visitors. Atlantic City’s set designers—architects, interior decorators, store owners, and amusement pier operators—constructed an over-the-top, fantastic backdrop for the Boardwalk. Buildings sparkled and glowed. Some looked like dreamy castles, others like futuristic skyscrapers. Business and political leaders also made sure everyone knew their parts. Through gentle urging, legal sanction, and official force, they tried to get everyone in the right place, saying the right lines, so that middle-class visitors could pretend to be whom they wanted to be while in town.

With its large audiences, detailed backdrop, and well-coached players, Atlantic City provided middle-class visitors with a stage for acting out their American Dreams of upward mobility. In these dramas, visitors cast themselves as romantic figures in the last scenes in back-breaking journeys that took them from working-class tenements and immigrant ghettos into the national mainstream. A few days off, expensive clothes, fancy food, and a ride in a rolling chair were their just rewards for months, maybe even years, of hard work and playing by the rules. Everyone else on the Boardwalk was participating in the same sort of showing off. Cast members, then, were also audience members. They performed stories of success, while watching others do the same. It was all very reassuring, and the scale of the performances underlined the perfection of the American Dream. Making the city even more appealing was the fact that it gave the new middle-class millions endless chances to buy things, often useless things, in public, in front of a teeming and fluid throng of harmless strangers. Atlantic City was, then, not just a showy consumer’s paradise, but it represented the crowd’s ideal of the perfect urban, public space.

Like all utopias, this one along the Jersey shore brought together individuals with commonly held beliefs and turned them, if only for a moment, into a com-
munity. Manufacturing community in America has always meant pulling some people together, while excluding others. This paradox lay at the heart of Puritan New England and revolutionary Virginia—and Atlantic City.

Performing middle-class success by acting rich, which was exactly what people did in Atlantic City and on the rolling chairs, entailed more than parading along the Boardwalk buying expensive trinkets and boxes of saltwater taffy. To show that they had made it into the middle class, the Boardwalk millions kept the poor and, more important, African Americans away from the hotels, restaurants, and nightly parades, but not off the stage. They cast African Americans in servile positions, and they did this in the same way that they performed their acts of consumption: in public, in full view. African Americans' very public poverty and marked difference accented the Boardwalk players' equally public performances of success and inclusion. Again, there was nothing discreet or subtle about the race and class exclusion on the Boardwalk. It was in full view, and it was another way of showing off.

All of this spending and consuming, pushing and pulling, climbing and sliding, in turn, produced the fantasy of leveling up—Atlantic City's most important product. Leveling up featured the two-way, public spectacle of acting rich, while holding others down. Both things had to happen for the fantasy to work. The ability of Atlantic City's tourist merchants to produce middle-class dreams of democratic ascent alongside racial and class exclusion was the reason that tens of millions of Americans flocked to the Jersey resort in the middle of the twentieth century.

THE BOARDWALK

The history of the rolling chair and the Boardwalk stretches back almost to the beginning of Atlantic City. Before the railroads came, handfuls of Indian families and a few white farmers lived among the duck ponds, briar thickets, and swamps of Absecon Island. But then a businessman, noting that Cape May attracted 100,000 visitors a year, looked at a map and recognized that the northern tip of this skinny barrier island was the closest point between the beach and Philadelphia. In 1854, Jonathan Pitney and Richard B. Osborne, a doctor and an engineer, bought a chunk of land near the ocean, lined up investors, and laid down a ribbon of track from Camden, New Jersey—directly across the Delaware River from Philadelphia—to the shore. A tourist boom began immediately. Well-heeled families in search of an easy escape from the blistering heat and stifling humidity of summer in the city started to come to town for cool breezes and fresh salt air. After the Civil War, another railroad opened between Philadelphia and Atlantic City. Competition cut the cost of the trip, making the beach town more accessible
to the most skilled workers and the ever-expanding urban middle class. In 1873, nearly a half million people made the fifty-five-mile trip from Philadelphia to Atlantic City.

As the tourism industry took off, a town grew up behind the beach. Along the carefully plotted streets named after the states and oceans, there was a telegraph office, a railroad terminal, and a handful of wooden hotels that looked like oversized barns with dormers and porches. Then came theaters and drugstores, churches and schools, and more hotels and residents. Italians from South Jersey, Irish from the mill districts of Kennington, Quakers from the Philadelphia suburbs, and Germans from Trenton built homes around the businesses and the beach and stayed year 'round. African Americans from Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia in search of work and the freer air of the North joined them and were among the city's earliest residents. Hotel and business owners hired black women and men to wash clothes, carry bags, clean dishes, and hammer railroad ties. By 1880, thirty years after its founding, Atlantic City boasted a permanent population of 5,477, a quarter of whom were African American. Over the next twenty years, the city and its black population doubled. By this time, Atlantic City had the largest proportion of African American residents of any urban area in New Jersey.

To the hoteliers and railroad operators, more tourists (and, to a lesser extent, more locals, black and white) meant more business, but more people also meant more sand. Sand of course got everywhere. Soon it covered hotel lobbies and railroad coach seats. In 1870, Jacob Keim, the owner of a Boardwalk hotel, and Alexander Boardman, a railroad conductor, got an idea. They suggested laying wood planks over the sand for people to walk on. With $5,000 from municipal authorities, the two men oversaw the construction of the first boardwalk. Eight feet wide, it stretched for a mile and was an instant hit. When a storm wiped away the first boardwalk, city leaders built a second, a third, and then a fourth wooden walkway along the sea. Pounded by winds and waves, none of these lasted. Finally, on the fifth try, in 1896, engineers, using steel and concrete reinforcements, constructed a more permanent structure. As wide as a two-lane highway in places, the new four-mile strip of six-inch-wide wood planks set by 1916 in a herringbone pattern quickly emerged as the city's signature attraction, its Fifth Avenue, its Champs d'Elysee, its front door, its equator, and, just like in the game of Monopoly, its most valuable real estate. City boosters, always prone to hyperbole, promoted the promenade as "the eighth wonder of the world," the only boardwalk anywhere that deserved to be spelled with a capital B.

Throughout this initial boom, nature anchored the city's promotional campaign. One brochure asked, "When you go to your physician and tell him your
brain is full of cobwebs, or your liver is misbehaving itself what does he say in nine cases out of ten? ‘Take a sea voyage, if you can spare the time.’” Philadelphia physicians traded these kinds of testimonials for free trips to the beach. One doctor swore that Atlantic City possessed “three of the greatest health-giving elements known to science—sunshine, ozone, and recreation.” The town’s first resident doctor claimed that Atlantic City’s ozone- and oxygen-laden air could cure everything from asthma and digestive disorders to diabetes and even insanity. The salt water, too, was said to be medicinal.⁷

But boosters didn’t stop there. They urged not only the sick to come. Echoing contemporary thinking about nature and urban environments, one of Atlantic City’s founders boasted that the resort offered the “perfect refuge from the debilitating atmosphere of the growing cities.” “There’s robust health awaiting you at Atlantic City,” another city leader crowed, “but you have to come for a while.”⁸ Families from Philadelphia and beyond did come and usually they stayed for a while, a week, a month, or even the entire summer. Beginning in the 1920s, each year, Dorothy Webber’s family took a train from Cincinnati to Atlantic City. Coming to town, her father told her, “wasn’t a luxury—it was a necessity. He believed the ocean and the beach and all was very good for your health. It was all nice and relaxing, anyway.”⁹

William Hayday owned an Atlantic Avenue hardware store in 1887. But he was looking to capitalize even more on the city’s emerging tourist boom. He saw an opportunity to make some additional money on the Boardwalk. That summer, he bought several baby strollers from Henry Shill, a Philadelphia chair manufacturer, to rent to tourists. He quickly learned, however, that the town attracted more people seeking “robust health” than it did toddlers. During Hayday’s first season on the Boardwalk, visitors repeatedly asked him for what they called at the time, invalid chairs. The next year, he purchased a bunch of single-passenger wheelchairs from Shill and brought them to the shore.

The city’s health promotion campaign worked, and the Boardwalk crowds grew. In these early years, thousands of sick and ailing women and men headed to town. Eager to breathe the city’s famed “ozone laden air,” they walked along the Boardwalk or rented iron-tired wheelchairs to get from hotel to hotel. Noticing Hayday’s growing orders, Shill himself decided to get into the rental game and hauled a trainload of his own chairs to town in the 1890s. At this point, neither Hayday nor Shill provided their customers with pushers. Usually nurses or companions guided the chairs down the Boardwalk.¹⁰

Nearly forty years after Hayday first began renting chairs on the Boardwalk, Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes’s creator, visited Atlantic City. By this time, the rolling-chair business had changed.¹¹ Seeing all of the “huge invalid
chairs” on the Boardwalk, the writer at first thought he had stumbled onto some sort of bizarre town populated only by “convalescents.” Conan Doyle soon discovered that the chairs were not just for “invalids.” As early as 1892, another reporter noted that the rolling chairs had become a “fad” and that “healthy people as well as sick people [were] affecting the custom.” As the rides got more popular, Shill and Hayday redesigned them to suit their new purposes. They transformed the single-passenger wheelchairs into white wicker baskets that could hold two or three adults and looked more like crosses between rickshaws and chariots than sensible hospital gear. Shill and Hayday now also provided the pushers, almost always African American men dressed in suit jackets and working for tips. Without retelling this history, Conan Doyle noted that the rolling chair had become “one of the favorite amusements in Atlantic City.” Like the thousands of people around him, he came to the shore “for a much needed rest” and “fun” and found it “with . . . [a] daily swim” and “rides up and down the Boardwalk in the double-bath chairs, propelled by one-negro-human machines.”

By the 1920s, the rolling chairs thundered down the Boardwalk “like a distant herd of galloping horses” in two separate, unbroken lines, one going north and one going south. On either side of these two strips of “baskets on wheels,” there were people, masses of people. “It’s like a million going this way,” one man said of the Boardwalk, “and a million going the other way.” “In fifteen minutes,” another visitor gasped, “you long for the comparative ease of rush hour on the Brooklyn Bridge.” Atlantic City was no longer principally a health resort or a place for a quiet retreat. With all of those rolling chairs and people, it was now a showy and noisy urban stage for race and class role playing. Sensing, and in many ways anticipating, these shifts, hotel architects and tourist entrepreneurs remade the city’s built environment to reflect the shifting profile and desires of its clientele.

THE BACKDROP

A travel writer using the pseudonym George Birmingham joined the Boardwalk crush in 1914. He almost didn’t make it to town. Toward the end of an extended trip that took him from Dublin to Chicago, he stopped over in New York City. Wanting to see an authentic American “holiday resort,” he told his friends there that he planned to go to Atlantic City. “You won’t enjoy that place,” these “well-instructed people” told him. But Birmingham did enjoy Atlantic City.

The Boardwalk’s western skyline captivated Birmingham. Staring at the lights, spires, and domes decorating Atlantic City’s hotels, Birmingham wondered about the architects who designed these structures. He wanted to know how they came up with such wild and whimsical ideas. He imagined that before they sat down to
sketch their blueprints they spent two weeks on the Boardwalk staying up late, riding on the rolling chairs, eating "crab dressed in various ways," and drinking countless "gin rickeys." After fourteen days of this, Birmingham thought that the architects' "dreams" must have become "imprinted on [their] memories," allowing them to "draw plans of hotels suitable for Atlantic City." Out of this trance-like state came buildings, he judged, more fantastic than stately. Birmingham didn't even try to describe them. They were structures, he wrote, "which anyone would declare to be impossible if he did not see [them] in actual existence."16

Philadelphia architect William Price had built three of the buildings that stopped Birmingham in his tracks. Fifteen years before the travel writer came to town, Atlantic City businessman Josiah White hired Price to design a hotel for him at the corner of the Boardwalk and Ohio Avenue. Completed in 1902, Price's long, narrow, rust-colored, four-story, stone, brick, and wood structure with a slate-shingled roof captured in many ways the refined simplicity and elegance of Queen Anne—style architecture and of Atlantic City's early mission. At a glance, the Marlborough Hotel—named after an English duke—looked like an inflated but still courtly country manor where wealthy nobles might go on retreat. Despite its size—the building filled almost half a city block—there was something shy, even demure, about the Marlborough. Its entrance and most of its ornamentation turned away from the beach toward its manicured lawns. Boardwalk crowds saw only a series of discreet sun decks and graceful bay windows.17

In 1906, White once again called on Price. He wanted him to add an annex to the Marlborough's front. The Quaker hotelier gave the architect two clear instructions. Following a series of sensational and well-publicized fires in East Coast resort hotels, he told Price to make sure that the new hotel was "fireproof." He also instructed him to design a building that reflected the style of Atlantic City in 1906, not classical Greece or Renaissance Italy or Edwardian England. Price followed at least one of the directives. Experimenting with a new and untested form of reinforced concrete developed by New Jersey native Thomas Edison, Price created a structure as immune to fire as any at the time. In terms of style, he went a step further. His building anticipated the future of resort architecture more than it reflected the times.

Not long after finishing the Blenheim, as the Marlborough's annex came to be called, Price published an essay on "modern architecture." Architects, he argued, should, on one level, act as "preachers," but "most primarily," he said, they should be "interpreters of the public mind and public feeling and public habits." Toward the end of the article, he talked specifically about his latest project, the Blenheim. Many fellow architects, Price acknowledged, didn't like the building, but he thought they didn't understand what he was trying to do. The Blenheim stood as
an "expression of the purpose . . . of the place where it was built: that . . . is[,] an expression of the purpose of the gay and sumptuous life . . . of the people that go to Atlantic City." With the expanding middle class looking to show off in mind, Price built a hotel using an architectural vocabulary that seemed to shout, just like the flashy couples in Jordan Sayles's rolling chair, "I've made it and I'm here."

One visitor said that the Blenheim's exterior "glued" his feet to the Boardwalk. Cream colored and fifteen stories high, it looked at first glance slightly out of place standing next to the Boardwalk's stout tan and beige buildings. Nonetheless, the hotel quickly became the city's most familiar postcard image. With its playful collection of domes and minarets, long looping curves and roller coaster-like swoops, rectangular and arched windows, the Blenheim was hard to miss, and harder to forget. More than any other Boardwalk building, Prince's masterpiece created an exotic, fairytale-like backdrop of luxury and extravagance for passing pedestrians and rolling-chair riders.

On the outside, Price made explicit reference to the hotel's setting, decorating the building with detailed sculptures of sea horses, seashells, crabs, and seaweed mixed with gold naval crests and geometric patterns of Mediterranean blue tiles. But the building at the same time evoked another faraway place. Visitors nicknamed the hotel "Baghdad by the Sea." Two decorative towers, which looked like crosses between the Washington Monument and steamship chimneys, fronted the building. Hovering over the pillars was a tremendous eight-story, gold-tinted, spire-topped, Byzantine-looking domed rotunda flanked on either side by tall, open-air cupolas. The Blenheim was, one rather ahistoric observer recently proclaimed, "the original Taj Mahal in Atlantic City."

Speaking in an orientalist vocabulary, the building, like all themed buildings, told an easily recognizable story. Schooled by nickelodeon films and pulp fiction serialized in the back pages of newspapers, visitors easily read the Blenheim's visual clues. Curves and minarets, domes and spires translated into the "East" and the Orient, with their connotations of unbridled passion, sensual pleasure, and wild adventure. Using these familiar quotations, Price turned the Blenheim from a hotel into a public destination, a place that told visitors that they were in a different, extravagant, and sumptuous place, just the kind of place middle-class tourists with a little money to spend thought they deserved to be while on vacation.

In 1914, Daniel White, Josiah White's cousin and the owner of a wood-framed hotel a few blocks south of the Blenheim called the Traymore, contacted Price. He asked the architect to turn his property into "the signature building of the resort." Price jumped at the chance. Completed by the start of the 1915 summer season,
the new Traymore was more restrained than its Moorish neighbor. One critic praised the building’s “sobriety.” Yet it could only be described as sober when compared to the Blenheim. Price’s third Atlantic City creation was massive, the biggest structure on the beach. From end to end, the 600-room, seventeen-story concrete Traymore took up an entire city block. Several tall columns climbed to a trio of large, wide domes and bracketed the building’s central block. Vertical lines shot up from everywhere, accenting the Traymore’s and the Boardwalk’s profuse urbanity. Two smaller wings flanked the main space. Each section, as Price’s biographer explains, “celebrate[d] concrete’s inherent plasticity.” But it also fit its beachfront setting. In many ways, the Traymore with tan face and multiple layers looked like a giant chiseled sandcastle.\textsuperscript{23}

Price’s Marlborough-Blenheim and Traymore hotels stuck out on the Boardwalk. They were taller and wider than the buildings around them, but in the late 1920s, they were not entirely unique. On either side of each of them stood other examples of Atlantic City’s “architecture of fantasy.”\textsuperscript{24} Some city leaders called the Boardwalk America’s Main Street. But that wasn’t quite the point of the place. This part of Atlantic City didn’t look like other towns. With no function other than to entertain, Boardwalk buildings eschewed repetition and exhibited few clear patterns, little symmetry, and even less stylistic relationship to each other. Yet their dramatic fronts told visitors that they were someplace different and special. Anticipating Disney’s Epcot, the gaudy structures offered visitors a quick, cartoon tour of world architecture. The Blenheim copied its design from Istanbul’s St. Sophia. The Dennis mimicked a French chateau; the Chalfonte-Haddon Hall looked like a temple-topped tower with an English Renaissance design; and the Claridge, the last of the city’s great hotels of this era, resembled the Empire State Building. Mixing classical and modern styles, the Boardwalk towers created an “outward eclecticism” and, more important, a clear architectural break from the blandness and repetition of everyday life in industrial America.

Architects and business owners accented their Atlantic City buildings with lights. At night, the Boardwalk burst, in one man’s words, “into a carnival of flame.”\textsuperscript{25} Atlantic City, wrote one of its many poets, was

\begin{quote}
where the nights are later
and the lights are brighter.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

Coming from every direction, the artificial lights changed the color and texture of the night sky. A neat line of tall streetlamps, resembling a row of carefully planted pine trees, lit the Boardwalk’s beach side. Across the way, the tall buildings beamed. Lavishly lit marquees that looked like jewels atop kings’ crowns hung above every theater entrance. As the sun set, restaurant owners plugged in flash-
Marlborough-Blenheim Hotel


ign signs that beckoned patrons to come in and sit down. Many buildings near the Boardwalk decked out their sides and rooftops with electric billboards. Going a step further, Brighton Park, in front of the Claridge Hotel, had a towering water fountain with thirty different colored lamps that threw off a wild and ever-changing array of pinks, greens, and yellows.²⁷

The city's showiest "urban jewelry" beamed from the amusement piers.²⁸ Dangling a quarter of a mile out into the dark ocean, Steel Pier—the largest and most famous of the city's piers—was draped with thousands of electric lights and dozens of large signs and billboards. Every three minutes, Boardwalk strollers stopped to watch four "electrified" thoroughbreds race around the Seagram sign—relocated from Times Square—atop Million Dollar Pier. From there, they could see the Schmidt's sign over Mammy's Restaurant, home of "delicious waffles" and "chicken in a basket," on Steeplechase Pier. Until the mid-1930s, this pier—the self-proclaimed "happy place"—also boasted the largest sign in the world. Towering over its merry-go-round, ferris wheel, and wacky slides stood a Chesterfield cigarette sign made of 27,000 individual light bulbs.²⁹

All the lights gave the city a pop-art feel along with a bright sheen that could be seen for miles. Up close, the glow turned night into day, creating yet another illu-
sion. The lights also seemed to block out vice. Some believed that crime could not exist under such brilliant scrutiny. In the end, the Boardwalk's dazzling lights, like the Blenheim's loud exterior, created an appeal similar to that of other twentieth-century vertical cities that was, according to urban scholar Witold Rybcynski, "vivid and visceral."30

Like their big city counterparts, Atlantic City business leaders constructed every novel, luxurious, extravagant inch of the Boardwalk's built environment to tickle, as one observer cracked, "silver out of the jingling pockets of the throng."31 On his trip to the city in 1914, travel writer George Birmingham—the same man who marveled at the Boardwalk's architectural wonders—caught the "holiday spirit of the place which gets a hold on visitors." All year long, Birmingham noted, "commonplace people" spend their money with a "carefully calculated usefulness." But in the shadows of Moorish turrets and twinkling advertisements for cigarettes, these same steady, middle-class women and men let their guard and their discipline down. On the Boardwalk, Birmingham concluded, "Our souls revolt against spending money on things which are really good to us." He was not immune. On his first trip down the promenade, he stopped to listen to a fast-talking hawker. He couldn't imagine when he would ever need a magical potato cutter, but that didn't stop him from buying not just one, but two, of the flimsy utensils. "Such," he determined, "is the strange effect of places like Atlantic City on people who are in other places sane enough."32

But it wasn't just the buildings and lights that gave the Boardwalk its fantasy, urban free-spending feel. Even after the city ceased being primarily a health resort, nature remained a central attraction. By day, people sunbathed, swam, built dripping sandcastles, and paraded up and down the shore. And nature loomed in other ways. To the west of the Boardwalk stood the modern, vertical city, to the east, the unchanging sea. The Atlantic Ocean, as city historian Charles Funnell argued, purified and legitimized pleasure along the Jersey shore. Certain of the essential goodness and virtue of nature as embodied in the sea, middle-class visitors justified their Atlantic City trips. They could tell themselves that they were going to the world's playground for the wholesomeness of the ocean. Assured that at least one part of the resort offered natural, and thus morally decent, benefits, they could then turn to the edgier parts of the city without too much guilt.33

Atlantic City's power and allure stemmed, perhaps even more, from the marvelous tension between nature and urbanity played out every moment on the Boardwalk. "The Boardwalk," wrote a Philadelphia journalist, "provides a combination of nature to the east and civilization (no matter how bizarre or banal) to the west that is quite suitable for relaxation." Was this, he asked, a "poor compromise? . . . I think not." Most Atlantic City visitors, he knew, thought that
"[n]ature in large doses can be overwhelming. She is at her best when she catches you with your guard down."

Architect Robert Venturi, coauthor of the path-breaking book *Learning from Las Vegas*, grew up in Philadelphia and spent his summer days in Atlantic City. The juxtaposition between the city and nature captivated him as well. When, he explained in a 1982 interview:

you come to analyze the combination of the ocean, the beach, the Boardwalk, and the great hotels, you realize that the dramatic quality came because you had on one side the vast space of the ocean—purely a natural phenomenon, always the same, never touched—and on the other side you had this highly artificial, very urban, constantly changing space.

"The drama of one side," he added, "with one thing and the other side with the other was simply amazing."

The interiors of Boardwalk buildings extended the illusion of wealth and fantasy created by their exteriors and the nearby ocean. In 1969, a Phoenix food writer walked through the lobbies of the Shelburne, Chalfonte-Haddon Hall, and the Marlborough-Blenheim. Even with the city outside decaying from neglect, these spaces remained impressive. "They are so big the lobbies have lobbies," she wrote, marveling at the array of padded cornices, flowered chintzes, and high-carved ceilings. Thirty years earlier, the lobby of the Ritz Carlton Hotel had left the son of a middling Baltimore clerk, whose family couldn't afford to stay there, dizzy with awe. Chamber orchestras played Bach—just about the classiest thing he could imagine—in the background. The carpet felt so thick and lush to him that he worried about leaving ugly footprints with each step, and there were so many ferns and potted trees that he imagined he was in Africa.

Throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century, “nattily dressed” couples walked arm in arm through the Marlborough-Blenheim lobby, which was filled with Chippendale chairs, overstuffed sofas, Oriental rugs, chandeliers the size of truck tires, bubbling fountains, and enormous marble fireplaces. On their way upstairs or to the solarium, they passed walls decorated with murals of English country life and moldings of sea creatures. They went by a florist's stand with orchids in the window, a perfume shop, and a French hair salon. After walking under the domed rotunda in the center of the room, the guests breezed by the hotel library, which was filled with leather-bound volumes of Shakespeare, and then by the writing room furnished with large teak desks. Pool tables with webbed pockets filled the next room. From there, they went down a long, sun-drenched corridor to the dining room, where, as one guest described it, "the chandelier
floats in glittering orbit and soft lights rim the base of the vaulted ceiling, suited waiters and crisp tablecloths form a sea of white."

During the city's heyday, these busy hotel lobbies, and to a lesser extent the dining rooms, functioned not as safe havens in a heartless urban world, but rather as extensions of the Boardwalk. They were, in other words, public—yet still rigidly segregated—spaces. It didn't matter if they stayed in the crummiest boardinghouse in town, any white woman or man in their Boardwalk clothes could sit down on lobby chairs, have a drink, or meet a friend. This equal access gave Atlantic City its all-important democratic cloak.

In the lobbies, just like on the Boardwalk, streams of energy and activity converged. Even though he was afraid to step on the plush carpet, the lobby of the Ritz thrilled a Baltimore teenager. "Someone," he observed, "was being paged. Someone was wanted on the telephone. A bellhop moved across the carpet, a small silvery tray extended in his hand." Filled with men in "white suits" and women "in dresses the colors of summer rainbows," the lobby, to this teenager, smelled of the "scent of money" and the "overpowering fragrance of luxury." Loretta Bessler of Philadelphia said of the Blenheim, "All those big ceilings on the inside made you feel like you were in Hollywood." "I loved the Marlborough lobby," wrote Louis Hertz, a long-time Atlantic City visitor, "where I could walk and feel like a rich man's son." Strolling through the ground floors of the Blenheim, the Ritz, or any of the other Boardwalk hotels gave these visitors a taste of how, they imagined, wealthy families lived every day. Even more, these spaces transformed visitors. As contemporary architectural critic Paul Goldberger explains, a great hotel lobby gives people the impression that they are "cosmopolitan, sophisticated, dignified, attractive, busy, daring, or rich."

On the Boardwalk's northern and southern edges, just outside the shadows of the palace-like hotels, there were ordinary pizza parlors, hot dog stands, and tiny storefronts with fortune-tellers. But the stores and shops between the colossal hotels added to the Boardwalk's fantasy backdrop. Scattered amid the saltwater taffy stores, lemonade stands, Chinese restaurants, and Jewish delis were an array of specialty shops and upscale boutiques. Most sold things and styles people couldn't get or wouldn't think of buying at home. One man believed that there were more fur shops on the Boardwalk than on any other street in America. At the Needlecraft, attendants served women finger sandwiches, tea, and cocktails and brought them designer clothes to try on in private suites. Walking south from the Blenheim just after World War II, Boardwalk strollers passed Kane Furs, Au Louvre Children's Clothing, Arthur Leonard's Men's Limited Fashions, Maison Mae's and Yamron's jewelry shops, and Ella Packer Perfumes.
In this section of the Boardwalk, each block had at least one linen shop and one souvenir stand. Before leaving town, most visitors combed the aisles of the Virginia Souvenir Shop or Jack's Souvenir Shop. They bought plates, vases, ashtrays, purses, notebooks, moccasins, and handkerchief boxes—all inscribed "Atlantic City." As they picked out their knickknacks and cheap suede and leather items, most purchased a few postcards. Later, sitting in their hotel lobbies or on their guesthouse porches, they scribbled a line or two about the weather, the Boardwalk, and the beach before dropping the cards in the mail.42 What, after all, was the point of traveling to the Jersey shore and spending all that money if you couldn't show off to your friends and family back home about the trip?

After combing through souvenir store bins, vacationers usually headed to a nearby linen shop. Rachel's Linens, Bon Marche, Ambassador Kerchief, and Grande Maison Blanche sold Belgian silks, Italian scarves, and hand-made French ties.43 But what these stores really sold was an image of class and elegance. Without a doubt, most Boardwalk visitors saw themselves as loyal patriots, even fervent American nationalists. That didn't stop them from almost slavishly imitating the fashions of Europe, at least those that they could get their hands on. To them, European style stood for fashion and good taste. Owning a Belgian handkerchief or eating a dish with a French name transformed them, they believed, into refined and tasteful women and men.44

Steel Pier was more boisterous than the linen shops and more like Coney Island than the Hamptons. Its interior matched its flashy exterior and created yet another Boardwalk fantayscape. The pier did have among its many attractions a few places that offered the extravagance and luxury on display at the linen shops and in the hotel lobbies. The Marine Ballroom featured velvet curtains and a radiant gold-domed ceiling. At night, well-dressed couples—sometimes as many as 3,500 of them—crammed into the room to dance. But what visitors really got at the pier was the chance to see and do something different every moment without feeling cheap or ordinary.

Calling itself "a vacation in itself," "a wonder of the modern world," and the "showplace of America," Steel Pier resembled other amusement parks that were springing up across the country in the early years of the twentieth century. For one reasonably low price, pier patrons got, in the words of cultural historian Russel Nye, "an alternative to daily life."45 Going there, one visitor remembered, was "like going to the circus, the theater, and the movies all in one day."46 Steel Pier impresario Frank Gravatt and his successor, George Hamid, Sr., made the pier into a world of constant stimulation. From front to back, the clatter and cacophony of strange lights and noises flashed and rang. Visitors remember running through the gates in the morning and heading to a printed schedule, and
from there, they would carefully plan their day so they wouldn’t miss anything. Starting in the morning and ending at night, the pier ran three movies, vaudeville productions, a children’s show of the “stars of tomorrow,” and, until 1945, minstrel performances. Where Steel Pier met the Boardwalk, General Motors operated a pavilion, displaying the company’s latest makes and models. Salesmen roamed the showroom telling shoppers about turbo-charged engines, double-barrel carburetors, and the scientific wonder of air brakes.47

“From 1920 through the ‘50s,” writes one observer, “everyone who was anyone played Steel Pier.” Guy Lombardo, Benny Goodman, Jimmy Dorsey, Rudy Vallee, Mae West, the Three Stooges, Abbott and Costello, Louis Armstrong, Gene Krupa, Duke Ellington, Dinah Shore, and Perry Como all performed there. Someone once quipped, “[B]ig bands weren’t big until they [played] Steel Pier.”48 Making it on the pier could be exhausting. Early in his career, Frank Sinatra appeared in the Marine Ballroom with the Harry James Orchestra. Afternoon rains and the crooner’s growing popularity swelled the crowds, forcing Sinatra to do eleven shows in a single day. The singer woke up the next morning with a sore throat and had to cancel a scheduled appearance at the Michigan State Fair.49

Along with big-name shows and first-run films, Steel Pier presented an endless stream of gimmicks and gags. Gravatt and Hamid booked wild animal acts, trained seals, boxing cats and kangaroos, incubator babies (an attraction first displayed at Coney Island’s Luna Park), a human cannon ball, and the High Diving Hawaiians. Alvin “Shipwreck” Kelly once spent forty-nine days and one hour—a world record—sitting on top of a pole on the pier. Patrons could also experience the “thrill of a lifetime” in the Marine Diving Bell. More like a ball than a bell, the blue and white steel contraption with narrow ten-inch windows lowered a dozen people at a time fifty feet into the sea. In 1949, a North Jersey couple got married underwater in the thing. An usher, who guided guests on and off the ride, remembered that people saw “some bass feeding around the pilings, or weakfish, bluefish, dog sharks [and] some stingrays.” Mostly, he recalled, the bell offered little more than a dark and dull view of the Jersey shore’s greenish-brown water. “People would get disappointed,” the usher admitted, but he added, “The ride up usually took care of things.” If that didn’t do the trick, the Diving Bell also had a speakerphone, which allowed people to call up to their friends on the deck.50

The diving horse, however, remained Steel Pier’s biggest attraction. Four to six times a day, as many as five thousand people packed into the bleachers of the Marine Stadium. To start things off, a young woman in circus sequins climbed up a steep, narrow ramp, which looked like a roller coaster incline. Just as she reached the top a trainer gave a large horse a swat, and off it went, racing up the slope, its steel shoes smacking against the wooden planks. The woman quickly mounted
the horse when it reached the platform forty feet above the Boardwalk. "The crowd," wrote one fan of the spectacle, "hold[s] its breath." Then the woman and the horse dove. "It's like flying," the observer explained, "the horse and the rider suspended in silent air . . . dropping." A loud crashing sound followed as the duo hit the surface of a twelve-foot-deep pool of water. The impact cost one diver her eyesight, but she kept performing the trick, and the people kept coming to see this novelty act.\textsuperscript{51}

Steel Pier's interior places created yet another illusion. Like other amusement parks, sections functioned as an extension of an outdoor picnic. Early in the twentieth century, Boardwalk vendors and restaurant owners persuaded city leaders to pass a statute making it illegal for the piers to sell food. Side-stepping the law, Gravatt built and Hamid maintained a picnic deck on the pier's second floor, encouraging patrons to bring packed lunches. Even today, visitors recall leaving sacks of ham-and-cheese sandwiches wrapped in wax paper hanging from hooks over the covered wooden tables and then rushing off to a movie or a show. The lunches, these people are quick to add, were always there when they got back.\textsuperscript{52}

"Wholesome entertainment for the whole family" was what a Steel Pier brochure promised to deliver.\textsuperscript{53} The outdoor picnic, along with educational exhibits like the Parade of Presidents, infused the pier with a dose of middle-class wholesomeness. Wax figures of Lincoln and Truman and packed lunches said that despite its tricks and Coney Island gimmicks, Steel Pier remained a safe place. Like the rest of the Boardwalk, it was a place where the ordinary rules of behavior might be modified, but they were never completely abandoned.

**The Script**

Atlantic City, with its "sweep of colour . . . , riot of sound and chaos of movement," its ribbons of rolling chairs, towering hotels, noisy amusement piers, and armies of people, was a mass resort.\textsuperscript{54} Like Coney Island to the north, it was a place that counted its visitors after 1920 in the hundreds of thousands each weekend and by the millions each year. In 1939, more than 16 million women and men—a number surpassing the combined populations of Philadelphia and New York—made the trip to Atlantic City.\textsuperscript{55} People flooded onto the northern tip of Absecon Island for the same reasons they went to Coney Island and, later, to Disneyland and Las Vegas. They came because Atlantic City offered them something they couldn't get at home, something different and a little daring, but nothing too perilous or dangerous. To dress in furs and sequins at home was, for most, to risk ridicule. But on the Boardwalk, pretending to be rich was a virtual requirement, the ticket for admission. Indeed, tourism officials constructed and contrived the promenade and its themed backdrop to encourage people to pretend and playact.
Atlantic City was all about the pleasure and fantasy of participating in the democracy of the imagined well-to-do, if only for a long weekend, and as long as it could stage these moments, it would remain a mass resort.

Like Coney Island, families came to the New Jersey resort to soar on the roller coasters, spin on the Tilt-a-Whirl, and escape the day-to-day grind of work and family. But in a class sense, Atlantic City was, until the 1960s, a step up from Coney Island. Boardwalk visitors dressed better and stayed longer. Bruce Bliven, the New Republic reporter who in 1920 tagged Atlantic City the “American Utopia,” visited Coney Island a year later. Amid what sounded to him like ceaseless and dissonant clatter, he spotted only the “battered souls . . . [of] industrial civilization.” Luna Park revelers stood out to him because of their Otherness. “Coney,” Bliven remarked, “is one more place from which the native Yankee stock has retreated before the fierce tide of the south[ern] European and Oriental.” Several months earlier in Atlantic City, he had spotted no Jews or Balkan refugees. It wasn’t that they weren’t there. As Senator Hiram Johnson made clear, recent immigrants and their families filled the Boardwalk. But it wasn’t the crowd’s ethnic roots that stuck out to Bliven; it was instead its sharp attire and steady comportment. He saw only white Americans on the Boardwalk. Just by going to Atlantic City and putting on their Boardwalk clothes, people who might be considered ugly outsiders in Coney Island became respectable middle-class Americans in New Jersey.

Unlike Coney Island, the Atlantic City Boardwalk, true to its middle-class nature, was never intended to be a place of “vulgar exuberance” where vacationers could shed their inhibitions. The Boardwalk was, instead, a place where public decorum mattered above all else. Guests were expected to dress properly and behave correctly. The children of cigar makers, ditch diggers, and garment workers came to Atlantic City to announce to everyone who was there and to everyone back home, who were sure to get a postcard, that they had made it out of the working class and into the middle class. A trip to Atlantic City was, then, a public performance of personal success. On the Boardwalk, the middle-class multitudes cast themselves as successful, free-spending Americans and acted out their parts by creating a public realm built around continuous shows of middle-class respectability and conspicuous spending. In participating in these slightly forced, slightly canned performances of well-mannered purchasing, they defined themselves as better than the Coney Island crowds, the rolling-chair pushers, and everyone else who couldn’t come to Atlantic City.

The Boardwalk differed not just from Coney Island. By the start of World War II, Las Vegas, while not yet “the first city of the twenty-first century,” was already a significant mass resort. In the 1940s and even more in the 1950s, women and men
who went to church on Sundays and to Parents-Teachers Association meetings on Wednesdays in Ventura, California, and Davenport, Iowa, took a plane ride to the desert to, as historian Hal Rothman observes, “cut loose, to disappear, and publicly entertain their demons.” They came to Vegas to escape for a couple of nights the cultural conventions of middle-class America at midcentury. But the same people, or at least their East Coast cousins, came to the Boardwalk for different reasons. They came to the Jersey shore to make a claim of respectability. They came to the Boardwalk to show off their hard-won middle-class status by acting like classy men and women. They came to celebrate the American Dream of inclusion and social mobility.

Visitors constantly talked about the Boardwalk as a marvelously democratic place. No matter where they slept in town, at a swank beachfront hotel or a wooden rooming house on a back alley, on the Boardwalk everyone was equal. Factory owners rubbed elbows with carpenters, blue-eyed Germans mixed with olive-skinned Italians, and Irish walked next to Jews. As long as they acted with grace and decorum, everyone—everyone, that is, who could pass for white—was welcome. Unlike Las Vegas, then, families came to Atlantic City not to fade into the background, but to see and be seen, to show off that they had made it in America and that they had enough money to skip a few days of work, buy new shoes and matching handbags, and pay someone to push them down the Boardwalk.

Many of the families who came to Atlantic City from the 1920s to the 1950s hailed from the Little Italys and Little Warsaws of what Ray Suarez has called the “original urban giants”—New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Pittsburgh. Others came from smaller, gritty, industrial cities like Newark, Camden, Trenton, Bridgeport, Allentown, and Reading. Still others who came had only recently left the old neighborhoods for the Bronx, Queens, West Philadelphia, or some other blue-collar or middlebrow suburb. Whatever their financial or ethnic differences, the people who came to Atlantic City were people for whom the city was still relevant. Some still worked there. Most still shopped there and went to baseball games there. Even more, they still had a romance and fascination with urban spaces and city nights, a romance and fascination that their children would abandon.

For these Baltimore and Bronx families, the Boardwalk represented an urban dream. “It was not a place for introspection,” travel writer James Huneker commented in 1915. “It was urban, it was jittery.” But this metropolis by the sea seemed at the same time to purge the city—the everyday city—of urban ills. “Wealth fairly envelops you,” Huneker continued. “There is apparently no such thing as poverty or sickness in existence.” There was no soot or huiking facto-
ries, no racing cars or barreling buses pushing pedestrians off the sidewalks; there were only bikes and slow-moving rolling chairs. With its tall Boardwalk buildings, the city had a shimmering skyline. But the scale of the hotels was not overwhelming or intimidating. The air was crisp and clean. And nature, that mystical and cleansing force, was right there on the other side of the Boardwalk. When the wind blew, it smelled of fresh salt water, not noxious gases. Even more important, visitors saw Atlantic City as a place where civil and well-behaved strangers filled the streets from early in the morning to late at night. The mob became the good-natured crowd. That transformation turned Atlantic City into a place of constant motion and activity, variety and spontaneity. It was a place of bright lights, the latest gadgets, and the right mix of fancy cafes and hot dog stands, elegant linen shops and tacky souvenir stores. As the stage for this electric blend of urban commerce and lights, the Boardwalk stood as a site where a lot—but little that was bad—could happen.

Like all middle-class fantasy spaces, the Boardwalk had to offer visitors “riskless risks” in order to bring them out of their homes and into the public sphere. For this public realm to take shape, guests had to feel like they were getting something different and novel. But before they threw themselves into this world of difference, they first had to feel comfortable sitting next to strangers on the rides and in hotel lobbies. They had to know that the people around them were like them and that they would regulate their conduct and curb their emotions and desires. Once they felt confident that they were in a community of like-minded, similar women and men, all of the other fantasies—the knowing deceptions—were possible. On the roller coaster and the Tilt-a-Whirl, people who never saw each other before touched as they willingly shared the ruse of danger. Riders zoomed to the edge of disaster, and then at the last stomach-sinking moment, they were snatched back to safety. Then, they did it all over again. No one bought a ticket thinking they would be hurt, but they let themselves be fooled.

The Boardwalk encouraged people to abandon other conventions of daily life as well. Visitors wore shirts and ties exploding with pinks and purples, hauled around stuffed animals the size of small children, and ate exotic foods from France and China. Normally reserved couples walked hand in hand, sneaking kisses here and there. Total strangers met and struck up conversations. Though ordinary behavior might be modified, it was never a free-for-all. In the end, in order for the Boardwalk to operate as a place of riskless risk, it had to appear safe. Inspectors had to check the rides and garbage men had to empty the trashcans every night. Uniformed ushers and doormen had to patrol the theaters and hotels. Even more important, city officials had to keep undesirables—criminals, the poor, and those marked as Other—contained and under wraps.
City managers posted confidence builders all along the Boardwalk to reassure white visitors. Normally tight-fisted local politicians spent money like drunken conventioneers on Boardwalk lamps and lights. They invested in this overheated wattage to convince tourists that Atlantic City nights had been purged of all threatening forces.64 Offering visitors further comfort, as the sun set each evening, the police department dispatched battalions of beat cops to keep watch over the Boardwalk. Hotels and theaters placed bellhops and porters dressed like Buckingham Palace guards at their front doors to raise the comfort level of patrons and to keep out unwelcome intruders.

Adding to the sense of public order, city leaders passed in 1907 the Mackintosh Law, which made it illegal for anyone “to bathe in the ocean or to appear on the beach front . . . in a bathing suit which does not reach at least four inches above the knee.” Another measure made it illegal for anyone to walk on the Boardwalk in a bathing suit not covered by a “robe or cloak reaching from shoulders to below the knees.” Violators faced a penalty of $200 or ninety days in jail.65 Beachgoers, apparently, enforced the laws themselves. “The other day at Atlantic City,” claimed a travel writer in 1915, half jokingly, “the crowd upon the beach mobbed and nearly killed a woman the skirt of whose pretty bathing-suit was, they considered, slashed too high.”66

Unofficial dress codes strengthened the city’s official policies. During the day, tourists and locals, explains a lifelong area resident, made sure they were “neatly dressed, but not ’dressed up.’” For a visit to Steel Pier, this woman remembers putting on “sandals and a summer cotton dress.” At night, everyone—and everyone will tell you this—“dressed up.”67 They didn’t wear their Sunday best; Atlantic City was a Saturday night kind of town. The Boardwalk was like “going to a ball,” one woman remembers with a toothy smile and a big laugh. Another compared nighttime to a “fashion show.” “We dressed up like we were going out formal,” this woman told an interviewer in 1978. “Sputz, that’s what we called it. You know, really all duded out. Sputz!” On weekend nights, Herman Silverman wore a white jacket, his wife a blue satin evening gown with rhinestone-studded shoes and a matching belt.68 All around them people paraded up and down the Boardwalk in their swankiest clothes. Men dressed in boxy, double-breasted blazers and pleated white linen pants. They accessorized with monogrammed cufflinks, silk ties, and felt hats. Women wore cashmere sweaters with mink collars over silk blouses and, atop their freshly done hair, lacy bonnets or hats decorated with flowers. The dress code did more than turn the Boardwalk into a nightly, roving fashion show; it marked the promenade as a formal and exclusive place. Those who couldn’t afford the right clothes were clearly unwelcome and could expect to be stared at and made to feel uncomfortable.
Fearful that a slip in public decorum would let the wrong people onto the Boardwalk, city leaders constantly tried to regulate behavior along the “eighth wonder of the world.” In 1945, the Chamber of Commerce urged local officials to do something about “indecent clothing.”69 A year later, “a man from Wall Street” with “the interest of Atlantic City at heart” told a South Jersey newspaper that “people here in New York are referring to Atlantic City as being dirtier than Coney Island.” Clearly worried about more than overflowing trashcans and stray hot dog wrappers, he counseled resort leaders to launch a “clean up campaign” and “see that bathers do not cross the Boardwalk in bathing suits.”70 Six years later, city commissioners authorized the formation of a “beauty squad.” Officials expected the ten-member unit to “shoo bathers away from the walk and watch out for other violations of police rules and regulations.”71

Along with getting rid of uncovered bathers, city leaders wanted the beauty squad to keep “an eye on the rolling chair pushers.”72 If visitors felt threatened at this crucial point of interracial contact, they might, local officials feared, stay away; with this in mind, city leaders tried to control the behavior of African American pushers. A few years before the beauty squad formed, hotel operators called on municipal representatives to make “pushers wear badges, dress better, and be subject to discipline if they insult passengers, drink on the job, or demand exorbitant tips.”73 Another group suggested in 1950 that chair pushers wear uniforms “and at the very least be neatly dressed.”74

White city leaders tried to govern—even narrate—every black-white encounter in the city, not just those on the rolling chairs. Throughout most of the twentieth century, segregation prevailed in Atlantic City. Boardwalk hotel and Inlet guesthouse owners refused to rent to African Americans. When four dark-skinned women showed up at the Brighton Hotel in 1948 with reservations, they were told that there was a mistake and that there was no room for them. But the clerk did volunteer to find them a room in the black section of town.75 Before the 1920s, African Americans could swim on many city beaches. But after that, hoteliers started to complain that they lost “hundreds of thousands of dollars” because whites “positively will not stand rubbing elbows with colored bathers.” The Traymore’s owners informed the mayor that “friends ridiculed them for coming to Atlantic City” where “colored people were all over the beach.” In response, city leaders decided to try to corral African Americans onto a single beachfront.76 About the same time, movie houses introduced their own rules of segregation. The manager of the Strand Theater on the Boardwalk told an interviewer in the 1930s that if it were up to him, “Negroes would sit anywhere they like.” But the movies were a business, he said, adding that “95% of the Theater goers . . . are whites.” “They object,” he observed, “to close association with Negroes, especially the transient
tourists that come in the summer.” So the Strand manager reported that he found “it expedient for the 5% Negroes to be put on the left hand side.”

After the 1920s, African Americans could gain full access to the Boardwalk’s middle-class utopia only if they could pass as white. “Did I ever tell you,” one man, who usually identified himself as African American, asked a friend, in the 1950s, “about the time I passed for Greek in Atlantic City? . . . Man, I was the King of the Boardwalk. I had a tailored suit, suede shoes, and a diamond ring set in solid gold. All the women knew me as Jimmy Williams, the Greek Adonis.” Those not willing or not light-skinned enough to pass must have felt on the Boardwalk like James Baldwin once did in a Swiss village. “Whenever I passed,” he wrote in a 1940 essay, “a wind passed with me—of astonishment, curiosity, amusement, and outrage.”

Sometimes African Americans got more than just cold stares if they broke the city’s unwritten Jim Crow rules. Police in the 1930s “forcibly eject[ed]” black families from any beach other than the black beach, known then as Chicken Bone Beach, located between Mississippi and Missouri avenues. Throughout most of the 1920s, the city’s black beach had been at Indiana Avenue, but when the Claridge Hotel opened there toward the end of the decade, the owners complained and managed to have African American sunbathers moved a few blocks south to the space in front of Convention Hall and behind a sandstone wall. Blacks were at the same time barred from the best seats in the movie houses, restaurants, and nightclubs. No Boardwalk store would allow African Americans to try on clothes no matter how much money they had. While the police might leave well-dressed black couples on vacation alone on the Boardwalk, they would harass city residents who tried to join the roving fashion show. They didn’t want them to think they had free access to this public space. White bar owners regularly threw black men out of their establishments or charged as much for a shot and a beer as a lobster dinner would have cost down the street. Steel Pier’s owners, sponsors of minstrel shows until the mid-1940s, sold tickets to African Americans, but they would not let them dance at night to the big bands in the ornate ballroom.

Tourism officials patrolled white behavior along the color line as well. Terri McNichol started taking French classes during her freshman year in high school in 1962. That spring, she came to Atlantic City with her dance company to perform in Tony Grant’s children’s revue on Steel Pier. As she waited to check into a Boardwalk hotel, she practiced French with a classmate. An African American bellhop overheard them and called out, “Merci.” The teenagers smiled and started to talk with the man. Later, an adult chaperone knocked on McNichol’s door.
“You will have to go home,” she announced. “Why?” Terri asked. It was the hotel, the dance teacher explained, reporting that the managers were uncomfortable with the way Terri and her friend had talked with the black man. The conversation apparently sent the wrong message.81

With interracial contact tightly controlled and regulated, white strangers felt free to press up against each other on the rides and sit in the dark next to each other at the movies. When they did meet black women and men on the Boardwalk, like on the rolling chairs, in restaurants, or at the shoeshine stand, they met them in heavily scripted settings staged to fill them with reassuring feelings of safety and superiority.

While police, merchants, and Steel Pier managers tried to keep African Americans from enjoying the Boardwalk, black people as workers remained visible. Lugging bags, clearing dishes, and pushing rolling chairs, they played central roles in the city’s tourist narrative. Indeed, the inclusion of African Americans in the story was central to the fantasy for sale in Atlantic City, a fantasy like the minstrel show, built around stock Jim Crow characters. Local businesspeople hired local blacks to do jobs that had them, as Robin D. G. Kelley has observed, squeezing “nickels and dimes from white men who longed for a mythic plantation past where dark-eyes liked to serve.”82

Middle-class white people—people who during the rest of the year generally did not have servants—came to Atlantic City to rise above the masses and to show that they were not ordinary. To many, taking the next step on the American economic ladder meant having black people wait on them. In this public production of race making, whites, particularly the children of women and men from Gdansk, Palermo, and Budapest, made claims to whiteness, giving up their status as immigrants and becoming full-fledged Americans. This made Atlantic City, then, a crucial site of race and nation making.

Atlantic City’s busiest days in the middle decades of the twentieth century coincided with, maybe even foreshadowed, a marked shift in ideas about American democracy and the proper path to assimilation. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, national leaders isolated European immigrants on the social margins. Only through near-complete assimilation could Germans, Poles, Russians, Italians, and Romanians gain full acceptance in America. But beginning with the New Deal and culminating in the broad-based effort to win World War II, many Americans seemed to embrace a more pluralistic, yet still racially determined, notion of the nation. Focusing on common suffering and sacrifice, this new melting-pot model stressed, for those of European descent, equality over difference. Immigrants no longer had to drop their linguistic, religious, culinary, and
cultural traditions to join the national community. They only had to have enough money to engage in a few moments of conspicuous consumption and, in so doing, act with middle-class restraint and decorum. Passing as white, eating fancy meals, and dressing up in public transformed them into Americans.

Glenn Miller's hugely popular swing band, a regular act on Steel Pier, epitomized this new America. The trombone-playing leader, as historian Lewis Erenberg has pointed out, "consciously sought to build an all-American team that fused the ethnic big city and the Protestant heartland." Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, and Christian Scientist jazz musicians and singers dressed in crisply tailored suits and played in his band, but Miller barred black musicians from his starmaking ensemble. Wartime films created another idealized, white, seemingly inclusive version of America. In these movies, Connecticut Yankees, Poles from the Chicago stockyards, Jews and Italians from the Bronx, farmers from Georgia's Tobacco Road, and Irish from Boston crouched together in foxholes, creating visual images of a nation based on shared commitment, cultural pluralism, and—implicitly—on exclusion.

"I should say," the always sharp-eyed Alexis de Tocqueville predicted long before the midpoint of the twentieth century, "that the abolition of slavery in the South will, in the common course of things, increase white repugnance for blacks." Something similar happened as the New Deal era and the wartime melting pot heated up. Immigrants' embrace of America seemed to intensify their prejudice against African Americans. Americanization was, for them, largely about the slippage between race and class; becoming an American meant becoming white and middle class. Turning themselves into Americans entailed a simultaneous process of making sure that African Americans, other nonwhites, and, to a lesser extent, the undisciplined poor could not be assimilated into the American mainstream. In cultural terms, this process meant excluding the Others from playing swing, riding roller coasters, getting cast as war heroes, and gaining full access to luxurious hotels and movie palaces, while still keeping them in view.

Atlantic City did just that. It included everyone who passed as white and middle class and no one who looked not so white or not so respectable. The Boardwalk served as a platform for this exclusive form of nation building as white people—in particular, immigrants on their way out of the working class—acted out stories of making it in America against a backdrop of contrived blackness.

The rolling chair presented the Atlantic City and, indeed, national drama of race and class making in its most striking form. Each trip began long before the actual ride down the Boardwalk. Days, weeks, maybe even months before they got to Atlantic City, white families started to look for the right clothes, checking de-
partment store sales and tailoring older garments. On the night of the ride, they took their time getting dressed. Their hotel and boardinghouse rooms reeked of powder and perfume. Looking like they were ready for a flashy formal, the family walked onto the Boardwalk. The father threw up his hand and hailed a rolling chair. An African American man pulled up, said hello, asked where to, and after the family had climbed aboard, maneuvered the clunky, three-wheeled vehicle through the crowds into one of the long straight lanes of wicker chairs running down the Boardwalk.

On the front cover of the sheet music for the song “On the Boardwalk,” there is a drawing of a white couple riding in a rolling chair. The broad-shouldered white man in the picture exudes confidence, even arrogance. He is not smiling, nor is he frowning. He sits erect, wearing a sleek, tailored suit, a stiff high-collared shirt, a neat tie, and bright, spit-shined shoes. He has a hat on his head and a thin, machine-rolled cigarette in his hand. Across his lap rests an elegant walking stick. Sitting next to him is a woman, probably his wife. She is dressed in a long, frilly, light-colored dress with a fresh flower pinned to her chest. Another flower—this one quite large—sticks out above her narrow-brimmed straw hat. Her long, slim fingers hold a frilly parasol. With a calm, contented smile on her face, she is looking around, maybe to see who is looking at her. Behind the well-dressed couple is an African American man, who is pushing them down the Boardwalk. He is wearing a loose-fitting dark jacket, white shirt, floppy bow tie, and light-colored pants with the legs rolled up, not hemmed. On his head, the artist placed an oversized porter’s hat, on his feet are well-worn lace-up shoes. His face pulls the caricature together. The pusher’s eyes are blank, wide-eyed, almost childlike. They hide nothing; there is no hint of pain or suffering. And of course, he is smiling, not a full-toothed, laughing grin, just a closed-mouth, cheerful greeting. Clearly, this black man is happy bowing for tips, pushing white people down the Boardwalk.86

The rolling chair in drawings was an illusion, but so too was a real ride on a rolling chair. The illusion began with the pusher. In this fantasy, Jordan Sayles and other African Americans enjoyed serving white people. The pushers did not suffer, like they did in real life, from “nervous fatigue, ruptures, tuberculosis,” and “boardwalk feet.” Every day, these men tasted the bitterness of having escaped the South only to find themselves waiting on a new group of white people.87 In the riders’ illusion, they deserved, even earned, the deference they received from these smiling servants. It was their just reward for hard work, for getting ahead, for making it in America. Once in the chair, the famed “wicker affluence” swept over them. For this one bewitching moment, the passengers made themselves into
central characters in a dreamland of wealth, splendor, and urban grace. They were the nation's leading citizens, living embodiments of America's promise of redemption through discipline, hard work, and following the rules and of the nation's equally important tradition of exclusivity. The Atlantic City Boardwalk gave these striving members of the midcentury's middle class exactly what they wanted, and that's why it was their utopia.