1960: Camelot on the Verge of Crisis

In 1960, New York was poised between the relatively innocent postwar years and the turbulent Sixties, which would bring race riots, rising crime, and financial crises to the city. Since the war, the skyline had gained dozens of dazzling glass towers, including Lever House, the Seagram Building, and the triumphant headquarters of the new United Nations, the most high-profile symbol of Manhattan as a global city. It was against this backdrop that the World Trade Center was conceived. Concerned that the new office towers and Grand Central Station in midtown would threaten downtown’s dominance of financial business, Chase National Bank Chairman David Rockefeller had recently established the political and business coalition that would lobby the World Trade Center into being.

Less dazzling than the new skyscrapers but equally important to the culture of 1960 New York was “slum clearing,” in which marginal housing was bulldozed to make way for high-rise housing projects, mostly in Harlem and the Bronx. That year, when it built more housing than in the rest of the nation combined, the city had roughly 100 such low-rent developments, with nearly half a million tenants, and established the Housing and Redevelopment Board to oversee construction. The Battery, too, was ripe for housing development now that the elevated train tracks had been torn down, and downtown planners advocated using tax money from luxury housing there to finance low-income housing in distant neighborhoods. Thus, the community built on landfill from the World Trade Center excavation would be white and upwardly mobile. Zoning changes, too, were underway that would help clear much of the manufacturing out of the neighborhood.

Financial fissures: The building boom helped obscure, for the time being, the deepening fault lines in the economic and cultural foundation of the city. As all those big new office buildings attest, New York was evolving from a manufacturing center into a service economy, one built on banking, communications, insurance, and retailing. The unskilled jobs that had always given newcomers a foothold were disappearing, both because of automation and the high cost of real estate and labor in New York. According to a detailed report issued the year before the Sixties began, economic forecasters studying the tri-state region predicted trouble for New York City. In part because “factory procedures, housing, transit systems, streets, and schools had simply not been able to keep pace with changing needs,” within a few decades “growth in jobs and commerce would be outside its boundaries.”* The hemorrhaging had already started. The city’s ports were losing business because the new, bigger container ships were more easily accommodated in the larger ports of New Jersey and because trans-Atlantic passenger ships were becoming obsolete in the face of commercial air travel. The manufacturing exodus, in which half of the 1 million blue-collar jobs left the city between 1950 and 1980, was well underway. The local job market grew 1.6 percent from 1958 to 1963, compared with a national average of 11 percent.

White flight: The population, too, was on the move. Suburbs and the automobile were luring the white, middle-class out of the city, as blacks from the South and Puerto
Ricans were repopulating the urban north. Between 1950 and 1960, New York City lost nearly a million whites and gained three-quarters of a million minorities. For many of those minorities, New York turned out to be short of opportunity. Blacks made up 13 percent of the city’s population in 1960, but received 45 percent of its welfare payments, and Puerto Ricans, 8 percent of the city, received 30 percent of public assistance. Slums were spreading, crime was growing, and resentment against the welfare class, as well as resentment against discrimination, was building. In 1960, a few years after the U.S. Supreme Court had ordered segregation of the country’s public schools, the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Jr. told Congress that if blacks had parity with whites, they would hold 21 percent of the jobs in New York’s City Hall, rather than their current 6 percent. His warning came just a few years before the first of a series of budget crises that were to afflict the city over the next two decades, crises that would disproportionately cut city services to minorities as racial tensions and the civil rights movement grew.

_Calm before the storm:_ But in 1960, these crisis was still in the future. Then, the city’s first public transit strike was still six years away, as was the start of a commuter tax and a city income tax. Also six years away was the U.S. News and World Report headline: “Does New York City Have a Future?”

**Sources for texts and photos**


