Making the City Authentic

CHAPTER 1

Cultural Capital Region

One late afternoon, a few days before Christmas, I was sitting at my kitchen table absentmindedly eating cereal and scrolling through Instagram. I saw the usual fare of earnest bathroom selfies and moody party photos. Between a tastefully arranged bouquet of wildflowers and a dog in a Santa suit was an ad that caught my eye. Figure 1 is a screenshot.

At first, I thought the photo was taken in Troy, where I live, but I quickly realized that neither a three-story brick building nor a church is all that rare. Even though I think of them as unique relics of a bygone era, the reality is that the quirky neighborhoods of today were the alienating, uniform industrial hellscapes of the last century. These buildings could be almost anywhere in North America.

Anywhere, as it turned out, was forty-five minutes northwest in Fulton County, where the Fulton County Industrial Development Agency and the Fulton County Center for Regional Growth were advertising

> industrial properties now available in popular towns, such as Gloversville, Johnstown, and Broadalbin, that can be customized to fit your business like a glove. Space is available in historic, grand buildings that feature distinctive architecture, 100 year old brick, and hardwood floors, surrounded by plentiful and free parking. If you need more room, space is now available in mixed-use, multi-story structures, former manufacturing facilities, and textile plants.[1]

The ad for three towns listed in rapid succession followed by the adjective-gilded amenities sounded like it was lifted straight from the

FIGURE 1. An Instagram ad for Fulton County, New York.

sales pitch of Lyle Lanley, the fast-talking salesman that came to Spring-field to sell a "genuine, bona fide, electrified six car monorail." A con artist like Lyle Lanley, based closely on Harold Hill from the play (1957) and later hit movie (1962) *The Music Man*, is a familiar figure in times of transition. Whether it's the Eisenhower fifties giving way to the psychedelic sixties, or whatever it is we are living through today, con artistry thrives in uncertain times.

The Simpsons' "Marge vs. the Monorail" and *The Music Man* are rehashes of an ancient story about the outsider who acts as a foil to a sympathetic, but fallible community. It's a story that gives us an opportunity to ruminate on our definitions of good communities and what they need. We get a chance to exercise our suspicion of both salesmen *and* our own desire. Lanley convinces Springfield to buy the monorail by tapping into their fear of being left behind with a threat to take it next door to Shelbyville. The marching band that Harold Hill was selling the fine people of River City, Iowa, in *The Music Man* was meant to

save them from the moral panic he had manufactured around the introduction of a new pool table at the local tavern.

These panic-inducing stories of modernity—fading into obscurity or descending into modern depravity—still work. Trump's promises of a border wall deftly used both: a one-two punch of losing in a global economy and stemming the supposed tide of "rapists and murders." City and county officials across the Rust Belt are realizing, just like Trump, that nostalgia for an idealized past and the desire for a dignified future, are a powerful sales strategy.

Are the leaders of Fulton County a bunch of Lyle Lanleys and Harold Hills? They have, at first glance, turned the con job inside out and upside down: unlike Lanley or Hill, who came to town selling something, here we have the town setting out to sell itself to someone else. The product they are selling is both an aesthetic and a business environment: a local government ready to give its antique buildings to an investor for a song.

If these cities think they are running and winning a con game at the expense of businesses, they have, in the parlance of our times, played themselves. Across the world, cities are increasingly strapped for cash. Indeed, even as cities grow to unprecedented sizes, the money needed to keep everything working is drying up.[2] A con game is certainly afoot, and local leaders may be in on it, but the marks in this scheme aren't the out-of-town businesses in the market for a new office; they're the people who need those taxes to pay for schools, roads, and sewers. And as more people move to cities all around the world, this dynamic becomes more important for more people.

This book is about the Capital Region of Upstate New York and its attempts to sell itself to employers, real estate developers, tourists, and potential new residents. And just like any regional label, the geography of what counts as the Capital Region is up for debate. When I asked Rocco Ferraro, the former executive director of the Capital District Regional Planning Council, where to draw the boundary, he declared, "My capital region is the four counties" (by which he meant Albany, Rensselaer, Schenectady, and Saratoga). Empire State Development, the corporation wholly owned by the New York State government and responsible for most economic development, uses a definition that includes four more counties: Greene, Washington, Columbia, and Warren. Fulton County—the self-appointed "final frontier" of the Capital Region sits just to the west of Saratoga County (figure 2). As you may have already noticed in the planning council's title, the geography
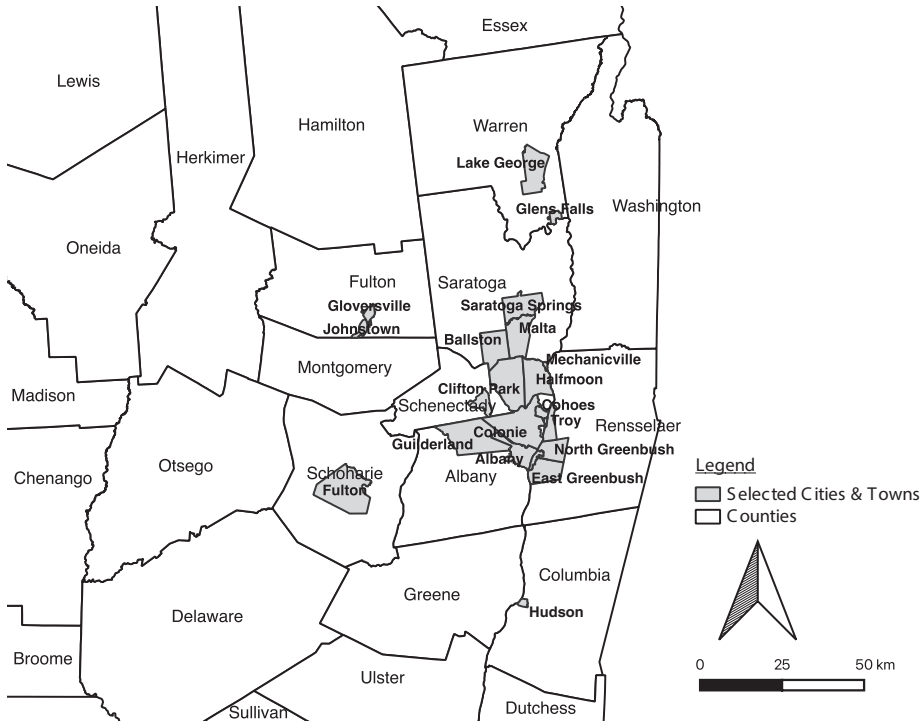
FIGURE 2. There are almost as many definitions of the Capital Region as there are residents. This map has most of the places you need to know about.

around Albany goes by many names: not just Capital Region or Capital District but also the Tech Valley and most recently CapNY. I will mainly be referring to the Capital Region.

We started at the far periphery so let's jump to the center. Albany is the capital of New York State, and in its mid-century heyday, it was home to nearly 135,000 people. As of the last count by the census bureau in 2020, it has a population of 99,224. It hosts several colleges and universities, the area's largest hospital, the State Capitol building, and the state offices that administer one of the largest state budgets in the nation. Many of these offices reside in a massive complex built in the International Modernist style at the behest of Nelson Rockefeller that now bears his name.[3] When the natives want to poke fun at their little city, they call it "Smallbany."

One of the most advertised parts of Albany is Lark Street, whose bounds on a map are Manning Boulevard to the north and Madison

Avenue to the south, but if you asked most people to draw it, they'd probably put the northernmost end at Central Avenue. It is in this third-of-a-mile stretch between Madison and Central that Lark is lined with shops on the ground floor of tastefully restored brownstones. There's a vegan deli, some quirky gift shops that make copious use of the phrase "upcycled," and a few cafes. This is likely why the Lark Street Business Improvement District declares on its website that it is "often called Albany's Village in the City."[4] In all the years I have lived here, I have never heard a living human call it that. I only come across that reference in tourist-oriented sites that are regularly fed copy from organizations like the Lark Street Business Improvement District. Sometimes they're more specific and call it "the Greenwich Village of Albany"[5]—a dated reference for twenty-somethings who are more likely to associate the Manhattan neighborhood with gentrification than bohemian chic.

Walk down the forgotten portion of Lark Street—between Manning and Central—and you will see a very different street. Here many of the buildings are marked with a metal sign with a big red *X* put up by the city to indicate that they are uninhabitable. The only business north of Central is a cab stand that also serves as paratransit for the disabled. Albany, like any American city, is segregated by race and income. To drive this point home to my students, I take an old map of Albany that bankers used during the era of redlining and let it slowly transition into another map that shows the present racial makeup of each neighborhood. The result is stark: despite over sixty years between the two maps, the Black neighborhoods of today are entirely enclosed within those neighborhoods that banks and insurance companies targeted for disinvestment for most of the twentieth century. This is also the case for Troy and Schenectady.

Schenectady sits to the northwest of Albany, connected by an Amtrak line, highway I-90, and a few state highways. The local transit authority also operates a bus rapid-transit line between the two cities with stops in the small towns and suburban communities that lie in between. All these connections hint at the relationship the two cities had nearly a century ago: Schenectady as an industrial behemoth, played host to both General Electric and the American Locomotive Company (ALCO). Albany served as the government regulator and promoter of these companies' wares. GE now employs about 4,000 people in the area, down from a height of more than 45,000 during World War II.[6] ALCO spent its entire life in Schenectady from 1901 to 1969. At its height, Schenectady had 95,692 people according to the 1930 census. Today it has 66,135.

The prestigious Union College still exists within city limits, and the Proctor's Theater has been kept in pristine condition and regularly hosts traveling productions of Broadway shows. The Golub family, which owns the New England supermarket chain Price Chopper, has kept their headquarters in Schenectady since the chain opened in 1932, and the city has received many philanthropic gifts from them over the years. And of course, no postindustrial town would be complete without a new casino: a Rivers Resort and Casino opened in the winter of 2017 in the old ALCO site thanks to $9 million in state aid.[7] The city also hosts a farmers' market in the street around the city hall on Sundays. From there it's just a few minutes' walk to the Jay Street pedestrian mall, which opened in 2011 as part of a $30 million redevelopment project focused on a neighboring building that now hosts a YMCA.[8] On Jay Street you can get a coffee, an antique lamp, and a tattoo.

Then there's Troy. It will be overrepresented in this book because I live there and know the most about it. I've devoted a whole section to Troy in this chapter as a case study in how small cities go from relative obscurity to social media darling, so I won't say much here except for a few historical details: It used to be a powerful banking and shipping city because of its location at the confluence of the Mohawk and Hudson rivers which marks the easternmost point of the Erie Canal and northernmost point that seafaring ships can navigate the Hudson. At its height in the 1930s 72,763 people called Troy home. Now a little more than 50,000 live in what was once derisively called "Troylet" but is now ironically called "the Troylet" as well as "the New Brooklyn."[9]

The regional approach I'm taking here presents one big challenge: within the three counties that contain these cities (Schenectady's and Albany's respective counties share the names of their biggest cities; Troy is in Rensselaer County), there are also thirty-one towns and villages and many more hamlets and census-designated neighborhoods. Each has its own laws, police department, and elected officials. Within and across these municipal boundaries are Industrial Development Authorities or Agencies (IDAs), Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), chambers of commerce, tourism boards, school districts, state and federal legislative districts, state-managed heritage corridors, neighborhood associations, gangs, cliques, a minor league baseball team, a transit authority, and competing hot dog vendors with rivalrous and dedicated followings.[10] And that's just the three definitely-the-Capital-Region counties. Expand outward and Saratoga Springs, Glens Falls, Hudson, and dozens more counties, cities, towns, villages, and hot dog vendors await you.