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A HISTORY OF MITCHELL PARK IN THREE ERAS: 1890-2021

By

Jack R. Rongstad

A Senior Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Honors with Distinction Designation

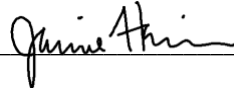
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Abstract

This thesis examines the history of Mitchell Park—and the various iterations of the conservatory it now hosts—across three distinct periods of urban development. Located in Milwaukee, WI, the County-operated institution consists of three conoidal-domes, measuring 140 feet across by 85 feet high (7 stories), each structure protects an acre of soil within; one dome hosting desert flora, a second filled with tropical vegetation, and a third mixed-use ‘show-dome’ able to host rotating exhibitions. The massive civic structures were constructed over nine years, from 1958-1967, as a testament to the industrial might of the growing harbor city.

Through a blend of primary and secondary sources, this thesis seeks to provide a more complex and detailed history of Mitchell Park than currently exists. The few historical writings that do exist, do not focus on Mitchell Park exclusively and tend to condense its long history into a one-to-two-page summary. By excavating the past, this thesis identifies and analyzes the social and cultural forces informing park design and development in Milwaukee. More broadly, a close examination of the history of Mitchell Park shows how place can be used as a lens to understand urban change through three distinct eras: Golden Age Milwaukee (1880-1930), Postwar Milwaukee (1945-1972), and Neoliberal Milwaukee (1972-ongoing), and in turn, how each era influenced park design and development.

Acting as a symbolic representation of Milwaukee's history and a manifestation of its identity, the story of Mitchell Park is also broadly reflective of the wider urbanization process in the United States. In attempting to trace the mechanisms that shape the city, this thesis explores the history of urban development, and the complex nature of power

within the city, through the collection, and juxtaposition, of both primary and secondary sources.

Introduction

This thesis examines the history of the Mitchell Park—which gave rise to the Mitchell Park Domes—across three distinct periods of urban development. Located in Milwaukee, WI, the County-operated institution consists of three conoidal-domes, measuring 140 feet across by 85 feet high (7 stories), each structure protects an acre of soil within; one dome hosting desert flora, a second filled with tropical vegetation, and a third mixed-use ‘show-dome’ able to host rotating exhibitions. The massive civic structures were constructed over nine years, from 1958-1967, as a testament to the industrial might of the growing harbor city.

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¹ Laurie Muench Albano. *Milwaukee County Parks*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Pub., (2007): 46-48; Harry H. Anderson, “Recreation, Entertainment, and Open Space: Park Traditions in Milwaukee County” in *Trading Post to Metropolis: Milwaukee County’s First 150 Years*, (ed. Ralph M. Alderman. Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1987): 255-323; John Gurda, “Summer under Glass: Mitchell Park’s Conservatory Preceded Mitchell Park Domes.” In *Cream City Chronicles: Stories of Milwaukee’s Past*, (Madison: Wisconsin State Historical Society Press, 2007): 153-155.

Neoliberal Milwaukee (1972-ongoing), and in turn, how each era influenced park design and development.

Acting as a symbolic representation of Milwaukee's history and a manifestation of its identity, the story of Mitchell Park is also broadly reflective of the wider urbanization process in the United States. This thesis includes five sections consisting of an introduction, three chapters covering their respective eras, and a conclusion. Each chapter will tell these three eras' stories through a close look at Mitchell Park itself.

Five questions guide this study's exploration:

1. What were the key influences (cultural, historical, political, spatial, and social) that informed park design/purpose?
2. Who were the key actors that shaped park development/design features/purpose?
3. What elements of park design/development/change were contested, and by whom and why?
4. How were park design/development aspects generally perceived, understood, and experienced by the larger community? What symbolic elements were especially significant?
5. How should we understand or read park design/development as an indicator of broader change? How does the history of parks/park design/park change represent a microcosm for the city, urban change, and broader economic and social forces? What is the place of parks in American society/culture today, and what social forces are most significant in informing/shaping parks and other cultural facilities in this present moment?

Answering these questions also requires a close examination of how the Mitchell Park Conservatory operates as an institution, and what it takes to maintain the aging structures. Beatriz Jaguaribe, in discussing the paradoxical contradictions embodied in modernist buildings still in use, highlights the perspective of a modern viewer: "By acknowledging the decrepitude of these public buildings, one negates their utopian premises. Built to convey a sense of the new and the ethos of the modern nation, these buildings were constructed under the sign of the future." Furthermore, the decay of these

structures reveals "the contradiction between the purpose of the modernist structure as the embodiment of the new and the tangible display of its datedness in the midst of the cultural transformations of the city."² She goes on to explain that the "newness" of these buildings was lost not only because of material decay, but also due to the "fragmentation of the modernist national ethos that shaped them" as their "projection of a future that has now become outmoded."³ We have lost the imagined future promised by the Mitchell Park Domes; the structure may be failing, but the meaning behind them has already crumbled.

The first chapter traces the origins of Mitchell Park during the rise of the industrial city in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. At the time, Milwaukee was at the height of its relevance, an era when the city pridefully referred to itself as the "Machine Shop of the World," in the midst of its industrial 'Golden Age.' After the worldwide depression of the 1890s, the 'developed' nations quickly recovered as capital increasingly concentrated and centralized under corporate monopolies. This period of rapid economic growth was fueled by the opening of new global markets during the emerging age of imperialism and colonialism. In the United States, with the closure of the frontier, the meteoric rise of Milwaukee was less the exception and more the rule in the increasingly industrial, urbanizing nation. The haphazard growth of the industrial city, coupled with the inefficient organization of the state, led to a period of intensified struggle. In the 19th century, industrial capitalists like iron tycoon Edward P. Allis and wealthy banker Alexander Mitchell were hugely influential in shaping Milwaukee's early civic

² Beatriz Jaguaribe. Modernist Ruins: National Narratives and Architectural Forms. *Public Culture*, 11(1), (1999): 298.

³ Jaguaribe, 299.

development. Yet, as the industrial capitalists of the Gilded Age accumulated an unprecedented amount of wealth, slums were rising in the increasingly congested central city.

Until the city's unusually late development of a public park system in 1899, the recreational needs of residents were met by various private parks like Mitchell's Grove for the wealthy, and beer gardens—introduced by German immigrants—for the city's working class. At the same time, the closing of the frontier had led to an increasing interest in preserving the “natural” world. The City Beautiful movement, for example, sought to tame nature and use it as a tool to impart morals on the working class. It was thought that through nature's "solitude and beauty," the problems caused by urbanism and industrialization might be alleviated. The paternalistic and reformist elitism of this era can be seen as an attempt to impose middle-class values on the increasingly dissident, organized, and in the eyes of 19th century elites; morally bankrupt working-class. Nevertheless, movements like City Beautiful were responding to the genuine problem of urban poverty.

At the time, the emergence of even larger, more vibrant, and dangerous cities seemed to be an inevitability, and, as a result, the burdens of growth and the potentials of reform dominated the discourse on the American city.⁴ The explosive population growth, and the blight it engendered, were cause for concern in the still mostly rural United States of the late 19th century. While reformers searched for ways to eliminate corruption, they also looked to broaden municipal services, attack the slum-like conditions created by

⁴ Robert A. Beauregard, *Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of U.S. Cities* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 60.

congestion, and facilitate the transportation of workers through the construction of expressways.⁵ Soon, the increasingly stratified society strengthened working-class consciousness and precipitated widespread labor unrest. In Milwaukee, labor unrest took shape in the form of its “Sewer Socialists,” whose progressive politics sought to correct the excesses of the age through reform rather than revolution. After a surge of German immigration in the 19th century, this industrial anchor of the Midwest became known for its working-class politics and the distinct cultural traditions of its residents. In this era, the city’s visionaries and socialist reformers successfully established a public parks system in 1898. At the time, the Parks Board purchased land for five parks; one of these areas, purchased from the influential Mitchell family, would eventually house Milwaukee's conservatories.

The second chapter traces the history of Mitchell Park through Milwaukee's postwar era, a time when the city enjoyed a brief industrial resurgence. Nationally, a space-age optimism existed, fueled by the seemingly monolithic (white and male) culture of the 1950s. Also known as the "American Century," the global economy boomed, a period of unprecedented and rapid growth in the years following the end of World War II. The simultaneous rise of regionalism, however, forced Milwaukee to enter an increasingly competitive battle with nearby cities and its own suburbs over who would receive that economic growth.

In addition, the postwar period was defined by the growing importance of growth politics in cities throughout the United States. Organized business interests were beginning to push downtown-centered, and growth-focused, development strategies. In

⁵ Beauregard, 68.

Milwaukee, these new strategies came into conflict with the working-class politics of the city's old regime, complicating the efforts of both sides to save manufacturing jobs as the global market became increasingly competitive. One such influential civic group, the Greater Milwaukee Committee (GMC), soon undertook ambitious campaigns to build significant civic projects, successfully lobbying for their construction using public funds. As the original conservatory, a turn-of-the-century Victorian greenhouse, fell into disrepair, it would not be long before Mitchell Park became another arena for Milwaukee's fragmented politics to play out.

The new conservatory would be monumental, unique, and act as a physical manifestation of the progress the city had made, and represent the bright future ahead of it. Midcentury optimism was high, and belief in the power of the United States was at its pinnacle. Americans had lifted themselves and the world out of the Great Depression, defeated fascism in both Europe and Asia, built a booming postwar economy, defeated polio, and would soon send men to the moon. A feeling that the United States would continue doing big things propelled LBJ's "Great Society" domestic policies and the War on Poverty. As John Findlay puts it in his book *Magic Lands*, the postwar era was characterized by the perception of "American science and technology as sources of progress and harmony, confidence in an almost unlimited ability to master the environments of earth and outer space, and anticipation of a world of both heightened order and greater abundance."⁶

⁶ John M. Findlay, *Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes and American Culture After 1940*, Kindle Edition (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1992): Kindle Location 2759.

However, by 1962, just four years after the start of the Domes construction project, Michael Huntington's "The Other America" would appear on the bestseller list. That same year would also see a rise in the number of American soldiers killed in Vietnam and the release of the Port Huron statement by the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Further trouble was foreshadowed by the fact that, in the postwar period, it had become clear that cities were increasingly losing jobs to their suburbs. In 1948, central cities had 66.9% of the manufacturing employment in their metro areas; by 1963, that share had decreased to 48.2%.⁷ The "money problem" faced by cities required their municipal governments to tax businesses heavily, complicating any efforts to attract any new companies that might replace those jobs that had already left.⁸ Compounding these problems, the ever-increasing class and racial polarization of city and suburb led to a traumatic financial squeeze in U.S. cities. The traditional ways of governing did not seem to be working, and many began looking for an alternative.

The third chapter examines the most recent era in the city's development. The end of the 1960s marked the start of massive economic, social, and political changes throughout the Western world. The "stagflation" recession of the 1970s prompted the end of 'classical liberalism' and its Keynesian economic guards—New Deal-era regulations meant to prevent another depression—and the rise of Neoliberal political-economic theories and policies in its place. Deregulations and tax breaks designed to allow the free movement of capital, nationally and internationally, were embraced by the Reagan

⁷ John F. Kain, "The distribution and movement of jobs and industry," in James Q. Wilson, ed., *The Metropolitan Enigma* (New York, Doubleday, 1970): 1-43.

⁸ Beauregard, *Voices of Decline*, 190.

administration in the 1980s. The ‘urban crisis’ would eventually reach every corner of the nation and marginalize the “national presence of American cities.”⁹ The future promised by the Domes, a future of possibilities, was soon replaced with one of anxiety. The inner-core region surrounding the Domes shifted from a working-class neighborhood humming with industry to an increasingly segregated and impoverished one filled with the crumbling ruins of empty factories. White flight and increased suburbanization drained the city’s tax base, as the Domes began showing signs of their age.

Today, the problems with the Mitchell Park Domes are widespread, with cracks in the glass increasingly visible over the last twenty years. In 2016, a falling chunk of concrete led to the closure of the Desert Dome, which was then followed by the closure of the remaining two domes for the better part of a year until thorough inspections could take place. As water damage continues building, the costs to repair the iconic midcentury structures grows exponentially, and the conservatory’s remaining lifespan shrinks further. The history of the Mitchell Park Domes, and the uncertainty of their future, broadly parallels the larger story of Milwaukee.

In attempting to trace the mechanisms that shape the city, this thesis explores the history of urban development, and the complex nature of power within the city, through the collection, and juxtaposition, of both primary and secondary sources. In doing so, this thesis hopes to pull away any veils that obscure an underlying historical reality. A comprehensive analysis can pierce through the spectacle and monumental grandeur of the Domes and provide us with a more complex, layered understanding. The Domes can be seen as a monument to American exceptionalism, technological innovation, and as a

⁹ Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996.

physical representation of humanity's complete subjugation of the natural world. The ability to grow flora from either desert or tropical climates in the middle of the harsh midwestern winters is, without a doubt, an awe-inspiring feat. Post-1970s Milwaukee is a city that has experienced drastic change since its peak relevance as a manufacturing hub at the opening of the 20th century. Today, the Midwestern city consistently ranks within the top five of the most segregated cities in the U.S. as it struggles to attract industries while fighting for relevance in the 21st century. Once embraced by Milwaukee, its working-class identity is now held at arm's length. The city's elites have refocused their resources on attracting the "the creative class" through the construction of state-of-the-art cultural institutions like the Milwaukee Art Museum (MAM). The new direction raises a question, is there a place for the Domes in the Milwaukee of today?

Methodology

This study can be seen as historical research, as it traces documentary evidence left by key actors engaged in the development of, and the reaction to, the Mitchell Park Horticultural Conservatory. It is essential to acknowledge that the nature of historical research means that documents preserved for study most often come from those in power. Although this study attempts to use a diversity of sources, voices will inevitably be left out. The primary drawback when conducting qualitative research and content analysis is the difficulty in producing generalizable knowledge. Because this research is primarily exploratory, findings were produced inductively.¹⁰

¹⁰ Steinar Kvale, *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, (1996), 97.

Data for the present-day Domes, primarily focusing on their current troubles, were gathered through various contemporary news publications and other media collected from online databases. Specifically, data were gathered through searching government records, news articles, and official websites. A significant amount of data were gathered through the city's two most prolific newspapers in operation during the construction of the Domes (1955-1968), *The Milwaukee Journal* and *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, but also through a variety of documentary evidence, government records, and other documents, which provide an overview of public discourse. Archival research was collected in tandem with secondary sources that provide crucial historical context.

In addition, archival data were supplemented by several interviews with key people who were involved in administering the conservatory, have a unique perspective on the present debate regarding the rehabilitation or demolition of the Domes, or those with knowledge involving their construction in the 1960s. Interview transcripts, meeting observations, and archival data such as newspaper articles, were imported into NVivo, a qualitative software program, and coded with data files stored on MS Teams directory.¹¹ Findings are then reported in narrative form to provide a detailed historical account. In most cases, pseudonyms will be used except when participants have given consent to be identified.

¹¹ Research granted Exempt Status under Category 2 as governed by 45 CFR 46.104(d) by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Institutional Review Board. IRB # 21.198, approved February 2, 2021.

Chapter 1: Milwaukee's Golden Age

Mitchell Park is situated on the top of a bluff that overlooks the Menomonee River Valley; once the "heart of Milwaukee's industrial section," the Valley today—although recently experiencing signs of revitalization—is mostly home to warehouses and parking lots. Yet, long before factories and railroad tracks overran it, the Valley had been a large expanse of marshland. The Potawatomi tribe—alongside the Ho-Chunk, Kickapoo, and others—are some of the most recent indigenous settlers recorded in the area. By the 1820s, a Potawatomi settlement of around 150 was located on the bluff overlooking the Valley, at the present-day site of Mitchell Park, who used the site to cultivate corn and fished in the nearby river. The tribe would soon be pushed west of the Mississippi by the 1833 Treaty of Chicago, paving the way for white settlement and the exploitation of the Valley's resources.¹ With the introduction of the railroad, the area quickly began to industrialize. The construction of rail lines allowed the region's agricultural crops to be brought directly to Milwaukee, becoming the frontier settlement's first driver of economic growth. As the railroad expanded during the late 19th century, the Valley became increasingly industrial. By 1882 a cluster of factories had emerged on its eastern edge, and by the 1920s, the Valley had grown into a robust manufacturing hub.² The region's gas plant, factories, foundries, along with the nonstop arrivals or departures of countless freight trains, all ran on coal, the only fuel source available at the time.

¹ William Cronon. *Nature's Metropolis*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1991), 29-30.

² Raymond Merritt and Carol Snook. *Milwaukee's Menomonee Valley: An Inventory of Historic Engineering and Industrial Site*. (National Architectural and Engineering Record Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, 1980), 1.

Enormous clouds of smoke billowing up from the industrial chimneys would have blackened the sky with toxic fumes.

The rapid development of the Menomonee River Valley is just one example of the speed and intensity that propelled the growth of cities during the 19th century. At the time, it was an accepted fact that cities would continue to grow without end, and civic leaders' earliest attempts at urban planning were spurred by the need to relieve the congestion of the inner-city, remove slums, and mitigate the heavy pollution caused by the haphazard layout of urban space during the industrial revolution. Much of this chapter, covering Milwaukee's Golden Age, will deal with the people and institutions wrestling with the fallout from that explosive growth.

The Growth of Milwaukee

Milwaukee was incorporated in 1846, consisting of two frontier settlements, Juneautown on the Milwaukee River's east bank and Kilbourntown on its west bank. The Milwaukee River, which feeds into Lake Michigan, made the frontier settlement an ideal site for significant commercial activity. It was not long before the thriving frontier settlement grew into a commercial center able to export raw resources out from the settlement's hinterland for use in the rapidly urbanizing coastal states. As one historian notes, "commerce was the base" around which the settlement at the junction of river and lake was built.³

By the early 1870s, Milwaukee ranked as the largest primary wheat market in the world. The wheat trade's highpoint would come in 1873, with the city exporting

³ Bayrd Still. *Milwaukee, the History of a City*. (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1948), 52.

28,457,000 bushels of wheat.⁴ However, Wisconsin soon encountered difficulties exporting its wheat. With the railroad leading to an increasingly globalized wheat market, growing imports from India and Russia would keep the price of wheat at a consistent low, the amount of grain leaving Milwaukee decreased.

Milwaukee's population grew from 71,234 in 1870 to 124,000 in 1880 before ballooning out to 373,000 by 1910. One of the main reasons for this population growth, and the most significant development in the Wisconsin metropolis' economic life from 1870 to 1910, was the increasingly important manufacturing sector. Like other 19th century cities, industry gradually overtook trade and commerce as the primary driver of growth.⁵ By 1873, ten lines of railroad, with fourteen branches, radiated out from the city.⁶ Milwaukee's early manufacturers initially relied on and benefited from the raw materials sourced from the surrounding state's farms and forests. Built on the foundation of local raw materials, the flour milling, meatpacking, tanning, and brewing industries multiplied.⁷

The rapid growth of Milwaukee's brewing sector, often cited as the city's first industry, was due to its brewers being among the first in the nation to use bottles and kegs. As a result, the industry quickly grew from 142,000 barrels annually produced in

⁴ Still, 64.

⁵ Still, 321.

⁶ Frederick I. Olson, "City Expansion and Suburban Spread: Settlements and Governments in Milwaukee County" in *Trading Post to Metropolis: Milwaukee County's First 150 Years*, ed. Ralph M. Alderman. (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1987), 21; Gurda, *Cream City*, 37.

⁷ Still, *History of a City*, 326.

1871 to 3,700,000 in 1910.⁸ Like other Great Lakes cities, Milwaukee was an ideal meeting place for iron ore, extracted and cheaply transported from the Iron Ridge and Lake Superior regions, and soft coal from Pennsylvania.⁹ And the city built up its industrial capacity, a robust manufacturing sector surrounding iron and steel rose in prominence and propelled the expanding economy.

Milwaukee's manufacturing prowess was harnessed by a handful of industrial capitalists, with the iron tycoon Edward P. Allis at their forefront. In 1860, E.P. Allis bought Reliance Iron Works for \$31,000. By the time Allis died in 1889, the foundry's annual production had brought in an average of \$3,000,000, a figure that, by 1901, had grown to exceed \$10,000,000 (\$319,642,352 in 2021 dollars).¹⁰ The rapid expansion of industry, coupled with Milwaukee's dynamic growth, made the city one of the nation's major manufacturing centers at the turn of the century, leading to one of the city's early slogans identifying it as the 'Machine shop of the world.'¹¹

A City of Immigrants

By 1850, a robust Germanic influence could be felt in Milwaukee, with immigrants accounting for 64% of the city's residents and over a third of the total population being German.¹² German immigrants, leaving their homeland after the failure of the liberal and democratic revolutions that swept Europe in 1848, were the primary

⁸ Still, 328.

⁹ Still, 329.

¹⁰ Still, 335.

¹¹ Still, 338.

¹² Still, 72.

drivers behind Milwaukee's early population growth. As a result, the city's immigrant population was politically left of center. Their politics and European heritage can partly explain the early victories of Milwaukee's socialists. Although the percentage of foreign-born residents would steadily decline throughout the 19th century, in 1890, the city still had the highest rate of foreign-born population of the 28 largest American cities. In addition, despite the proportion of foreign-born German citizens decreasing to 17% in 1910, over half of the city's population identified as having a German background. As a result, some scholars actually consider 1910 as being the peak intensity for the city's Germanness.¹³

The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw the United States go through a period of increased industrial centralization, leading to massive population growth in the nation's cities. The concept of a 'Manifest Destiny' in the United States led to rapid westward expansion, with many settling in cities throughout the Midwest in the hopes of finding a better life. Horace Greeley's famous advice to: "Go west, young man" captured the kinetic energy of the moment. Numerous European immigrants were attracted to the city. Germans, Poles, and other Eastern European immigrants worked in Milwaukee's varied industries like metalworking, tool and die, and precision manufacturing. Immigrants quickly filled the growing neighborhoods situated on streetcar lines throughout the city. However, the centralization of industry and commerce from 1870-1920 left a physical toll on urban residents and degraded their surroundings.¹⁴ Milwaukee's rapid growth also

¹³ Still, 258.

¹⁴ John M. McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier: Planning and the Politics of Growth, 1910-1960*. (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009): 62-63.

led to dense dilapidated neighborhoods.¹⁵ Together with increasing pollution and rampant corruption, these factors created an atmosphere of reform in America, one ripe with potential.

The Origin of Mitchell Park

Mitchell's Grove

The various ethnic groups of early Milwaukee typically frequented specific parks, using the sites as locations where they might host traditional festivals or meet for community gatherings. A wooded tract located in, what was during the 19th century, the southern periphery of Milwaukee was one such private park. The area was known as “Mitchell’s Grove” after the land’s owner, the railroad magnate and financier Alexander Mitchell, who had developed it for use by his friends and his “fellow Scots.”¹⁶ Mitchell’s Grove, a private recreational space, was characteristic of early Milwaukee.

The Gilded Age was a time of great wealth and intensifying poverty. Early industrial capitalists amassed great fortunes built on monopolies of various industries. 'Robber Barons' like Andrew Carnegie, J.P. Morgan, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and John D. Rockefeller became some of the wealthiest Americans of all time. Milwaukee's 'Vanderbilt' was the immigrant Scott Alexander Mitchell, who became the richest man in Wisconsin after dominating the early banking and financial industries and acquiring Wisconsin's three major rail lines.¹⁷

Milwaukee's Gilded Age

¹⁵ Still, *History of a City*, 268.

¹⁶ Ernest Louis Meyer, *Bucket Boy, a Milwaukee Legend* (New York: Hastings House, 1947), 21.

¹⁷ Olson, *City Expansion and Suburban Spread*, 21-23.

In 1839, the 22-year-old Alexander Mitchell (1817-1887) would have been one of the many immigrants arriving in Milwaukee on a lake steamer. Stepping off the boat, Mitchell would have been greeted by a small village consisting of just a few buildings, whose roughly 1,500 inhabitants would still be recovering from the depression of 1837. Although the immigrant Scot had arrived in Milwaukee with little capital, by 1885, he would be the richest man in Wisconsin and have accumulated several millions of dollars.¹⁸

Mitchell was a successful banker and a dominant force in the state's business community, founding the Marine Bank of Wisconsin before going on to become the president of the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul lines, collectively referred to as the "Milwaukee Road," in 1863.¹⁹ Under his stewardship, the Milwaukee Road became one of the nation's most profitable railways, fueling the heavy industry around its hub in the Menomonee Valley. As the city's most prominent banker and financier, the "Rothschild of the west" was behind the scenes of almost every speculative operation or financial activity in Milwaukee. The banker would have seen Milwaukee grow from a swampy little village on the shores of Lake Michigan to the bustling metropolis and a center for industry and commerce in the Midwest.²⁰

By 1870 Mitchell's enormous wealth had allowed him to expand his estate to the size of a city block. A lover of flowers, Mitchell spent considerable sums to decorate the

¹⁸ David Blake Leonard, "A Biography of Alexander Mitchell: 1817-1887." *master's thesis*, (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1951), 160.

¹⁹ Olson, *City Expansion and Suburban Spread*, 21-23.

²⁰ Leonard, *Biography*, 160.

grounds of his mansion. The estate featured a conservatory complex of six buildings containing 9,000 plants under 15,000 square feet of glass.²¹ Each greenhouse served a different purpose; one housed flowers from all over the world, another contained various mushrooms, others had roses, grapes, peaches, apricots, figs, pineapples, and nectarines.²²

To the people of Milwaukee, Alexander Mitchell was an unknown, foreboding figure. The wealthy financier was not known for his philanthropy, spending “more on a fence around his mansion than he ever gave to charity.”²³ Thus, the reportedly “breathtaking” conservatory was never open to the public, and instead was built for the enjoyment of the banker’s wealthy friends.

From Private Grove to Public Park

Three years after Alexander Mitchell’s death in 1887, his son John L. Mitchell, a U.S. Senator, would sell 25 acres of his father’s land to the city for \$60,000 (\$1,791,402 in 2021 dollars) before later donating his remaining five acres.²⁴ In 1889, the site became one of the five parks first established by the city’s newly organized parks board. In recognition of the donation, and the significant impact the powerful family has had on Milwaukee, the city parks board named the site Mitchell Park. By the late 1890s,

²¹ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Jan. 25, 1870.

²² Leonard, *Biography*, 154.

²³ Leonard, 154-162.

²⁴ Gurda, *Cream City*, 37.

Mitchell Park was already a popular gathering spot for the residents living in Milwaukee's near west and south sides.²⁵

Not long before the city acquired the land for the park, Alexander Mitchell's sprawling estate would also be sold by his widow. The mansion was soon replaced by the iconic Wisconsin Club, which demolished the "breathtaking" conservatory and built a bowling alley in its place.²⁶ With the loss of the conservatory on their mind, the Milwaukee Park Commission "decided that the community deserved a facility just as grand."²⁷ Henry C. Koch, the architect behind other iconic Milwaukee buildings such as City Hall and the Pabst headquarters, was commissioned to design the new botanical conservatory and park that surrounded it.

Built in 1898, the Victorian greenhouse was described as an "elegant glass palace," consisting of a central dome with barn-shaped wings on either side, all covered with window-like panes of glass. Sometime later, another wing was added, extending south towards the formal gardens, which formed a pleasing approach to the facility. Including the additions made between 1906 and 1932, over \$200,000 had been invested in the conservatory (\$3,966,365 in 2021).²⁸ In November of 1901, several thousand

²⁵ Avery Wittenberger, "Mitchell Park, One of Our First, Was Always Noted for Flowers," *Milwaukee Journal*, June 28, 1962.

²⁶ "Milwaukee's Mitchell Park Horticultural Conservatory," History of Milwaukee's Mitchell Park Domes 1795 - 1955 (Friends of the Domes), accessed July 30, 2021, <https://milwaukeedomes.org/early-domes-history>.

²⁷ Avery Wittenberger, "Mitchell Park, One of Our First, Was Always Noted for Flowers," *Milwaukee Journal*, June 28, 1962.

²⁸ "Flower Haven Closes Doors: Conservatory Unsafe," *Milwaukee Journal*, July 11, 1955.

visited the greenhouse on the opening day of its third annual free flower show, where over 80 varieties of chrysanthemum plants would have been displayed.²⁹



Henry C. Koch Designed the Early Conservatory (1898), Taking Inspiration from the Crystal Palace in London, England (1851-1936)³⁰

Not long after the board's initial acquisition, crews were put to work on the site. A road was built, and a small lagoon was dug. A small boathouse was built on the southwest edge of the artificial pond, and rowboats were made available for rental. The boating quickly increased in popularity, and it became necessary to enlarge the pond and

²⁹ Avery Wittenberger, "Mitchell Park, One of Our First, Was Always Noted for Flowers," *Milwaukee Journal*, June 28, 1962.

³⁰ Friends of the Domes, *Mitchell Park History*, (accessed July 30, 2021), <https://milwaukeedomes.org/img/early-conservatory3.jpg>.

add more boats. Work on replacing the original lagoon began in 1901 and would be completed five years later. The lagoon would be reshaped again in the early 1950s, alongside a renovation of the entire park.

Mitchell Park's "Sunken Gardens" was patterned after the 15th and 16th-century French parterre, located outside the Koch-designed Conservatory. The gardens consisted of planting beds, tightly clipped hedges, and gravel paths that formed symmetrical patterns. Although it dates to 1901, the site would not be inaugurated for another three years when dozens of Chinese lanterns were released.³¹ Annually in the spring, the lilies would come to life in the water mirror at the lowest level, and colorful flowers and foliage are planted in the surrounding area. The spacing of the plantings creates a carpet bedding effect meant to mimic the ways old French estates displayed flowers to formalize the approaches to buildings.³²

Walking east from the Sunken Gardens led to an area overlooking the lagoon, providing a "fine vantage point for taking pictures or just enjoying a tranquil water scene." Continuing along a winding path lined with flowers led down to the "gently rolling terrain toward the water's edge" and around to a recreation building with a stand selling refreshments and a dock renting rowboats for use in the nearby lagoon. The description of the gardens that appeared in the *History of Milwaukee County* (written in the late thirties) described them as being 600 feet long, 250 feet wide, and containing an estimated 100,000 plants arranged in traditional designs.³³ Seen as one of the city's oldest

³¹ "Nostalgic Words----Mitchell Park Conservatory 'Obituary,'" *Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 10, 1955.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Avery Wittenberger, "Visit Sunken Gardens, Parkways, Tiny Old Parks on the South Side," *Milwaukee Journal*, July 13, 1960.

and most well-known park attractions, Mitchell Park supervisor Eugene W. Rosebrook, referred to the garden as "a part of old Milwaukee."³⁴

Institution Building

To contextualize progressive-era Mitchell Park, and its Victorian greenhouse, some space must be spent on the broader history of Milwaukee's public parks and understanding the progressives responsible for the system's creation. The creation of a public park system was a key aspect of the wider urban agenda set by the city's potent Socialist party at the turn of the century. To Milwaukee's socialists, a strong park system could be used to convey the value of an alternative to capitalism in the United States. The use of the parks system to showcase municipal socialism sets the stage for the hugely ambitious projects enacted by the County in the postwar period. With that in mind, this section starts with a look into the factors leading to the creation of a public park system in Milwaukee, and then explores not only the various challenges that the system faced at the dawn of the twentieth century, but also how the system evolved as it searched for solutions to those problems.

Private Parks and Beer Gardens

Although Frontier-Milwaukee's early town plans did include space for "public squares," this was more of an economic and political necessity, as they were located outside of courthouses with little concern for the public's welfare. There was little need to protect sections of green space at the time, as the settlement was still surrounded by

³⁴ Avery Wittenberger, "Mitchell Park, One of Our First, Was Always Noted for Flowers," *Milwaukee Journal*, June 28, 1962.

ample timberland and rolling prairies.³⁵ With this in mind, as the city began quickly growing throughout the 19th century, it would be the private sector, instead of the public, that would step in to meet the community's need for recreation.³⁶

The European tradition of neighborhood *bier gartens*, which pre-Civil War German immigrants had brought to the city, led to a considerable delay in broader public park advocacy compared to Milwaukee's peer cities. Much of what made these private gardens so attractive was in the unique synthesis of the location's natural beauty, good food, and ample supplies of Milwaukee beer. An additional draw of these early beer gardens lay in their planting and cultivation of various flowers alongside the area's natural growth of trees.³⁷ Ludwig's garden was one such example, located on the Milwaukee River's east bank near Pleasant Street; the garden contained a significant and valuable nursery used by the growing metropolis. As time went on, the opportunities for recreation and pleasure within the gardens expanded. Musical entertainment, state fair-like activities, and tracks for betting on races were some of the activities that might be taking place in Milwaukee's numerous beer gardens during the late 19th century.

The commercial green spaces were centers for working-class recreation, whose celebrations provided a temporary escape from the problems of urbanism.³⁸ Additionally, these early beer gardens were host to a myriad of community organizations, churches,

³⁵ Anderson, *Park Traditions*, 256.

³⁶ Andrew Hurley, "Fiasco at Wagner Electric: Environmental Justice and Urban Geography in St. Louis," *Environmental History* 2, no. 4 (1997): 460-81; Judith W. Leavitt, *The Healthiest City: Milwaukee and the Politics of Health Reform* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982).

³⁷ Anderson, *Park Traditions*, 257

³⁸ Anderson, 258.

and schools. Milwaukee's "Gemütlichkeit" emphasis, generated by the European population's enthusiasm for the gardens and private parks, played an essential role in influencing the eventual development of a "strong park tradition" throughout the community and far outlasted the eventual decline of the beer gardens.³⁹ Significantly, the private gardens also retained a certain amount of green space within the core city, where high property values might have prevented Milwaukee from using the sites for its modern public park system. In fact, a "surprisingly large" number of sites in the modern Milwaukee Park system can be traced back to their origins as private parks.⁴⁰

However, the inclusion of alcohol as a fundamental part of the city's only recreational space did not sit well with Milwaukee's puritanical upper classes and further contrasted with the Olmstedian parks, which were considered "elite-centered oasis" on the outskirts of the city. The low moral reputation of the beer gardens was seen as an issue to some, with one 1872 letter to the editor of the Milwaukee Journal anxiously explaining that "our citizens can walk and ride and breathe pure air, and spend an hour or so for recreation without paying for admittance, and being surrounded by the demoralizing influence of beer-guzzling."⁴¹

Milwaukee's Public Park System

Although the need for parks was known, it was not until 1899 that a citywide park system would finally take shape and remedy Milwaukee's "backwardness in providing

³⁹ Anderson, 263.

⁴⁰ Anderson, 268.

⁴¹ Victor Greene, "Dealing with Diversity: Milwaukee's Multiethnic Festivals and Urban Identity, 1840–1940," *Journal of Urban History* 31, no. 6 (September 2005): 820-49.

residents with public parks.”⁴² The reasons for this delay were numerous: the city's funds had been wrapped up subsidizing railroad creation pre-Civil War; private parks were popular and accepted; and those parks that did exist were operated on a ward basis. In the late 19th century, inefficient city government alongside rapid population growth led to the rise of political machines that concentrated power in the hands of several “bosses.” The “bossism” of the Gilded Age came with some benefits for powerful wards, but also engendered a deeper spatial inequality throughout the city. The Milwaukee ward system’s inequality was a major stumbling block hit by earlier attempts to create a citywide park system; individual council members and their constituents opposed any change in the system that would take away their control or force them to pay taxes that would be used outside of their wards.

The establishment of a public park system soon became a foundational part of the platform of progressive mayoral candidates. By the mid-1880s, the city's elite finally moved in support of the public park proposal. Their increasing sense of civic shame drove their change in attitude after, not only their Great Lake rival of Chicago proved able to complete a comprehensive park system, but also several smaller Wisconsin cities.⁴³ Soon after, an exposition hall, art gallery, public library, natural history museum, and a park system would be built in the span of eleven years (1878-1889) as “civic pride dictated a corresponding attention to cultural and recreational activities.”⁴⁴

⁴² Anderson, *Park Traditions*, 262.

⁴³ Olson, *City Expansion and Suburban Spread*, 23.

⁴⁴ Still, *History of a City*, 383.

Milwaukee would finally form a Parks Board in 1890, tasking the newly formed agency to buy land for parks and promote aesthetically pleasing roadways. One of the first leading board members, Christian Wahl, was a retired wealthy businessman who hoped to "create a system of boulevards and parks to encircle the entire city."⁴⁵ Drawing on examples from Chicago's Park systems, Wahl envisioned a broad parks program. In the late 1890s, Milwaukee's residents became inspired by the park constructions in New York, Cleveland, and Detroit. A decision was made to develop a lake park so those who could not afford to travel to the country would have access to "healthy and innocent recreation."⁴⁶ Pointing to the example of Central Park in NYC, among others, Christian Wahl praised these parks as the "lungs of those great cities."⁴⁷ Wahl's early park advocacy efforts earned him a reputation as the father of Milwaukee's city park system.

The initial parks board was given the ability to finance land purchases, although they could only acquire land within city limits. By then, little space in the city had been left unoccupied. The city owned little more than 70 acres of green space, 55 of which were donations from private citizens.⁴⁸ By the end of 1890, the board had selected five park sites, including the eventual Mitchell Park. Initially, the city park system emphasized facilities that were "carefully and artistically designed and largely artificial" in their use of natural landscape. Milwaukee's estimated park attendance exceeded one million in 1894, its first year operating, reflecting a significant demand for public parks.

⁴⁵ Anderson, *Park Traditions*, 266.

⁴⁶ Anderson, 265.

⁴⁷ Anderson, 262.

⁴⁸ Still, *History of a City*, 383.

Still, as late as 1906, park development remained far behind what similar cities had accomplished.⁴⁹

One of the park boards' earliest actions was to contract the landscape-architectural firm of Frederick Law Olmsted, the Central Park designer, to develop the initial five sites. Olmsted strongly believed in the potential public park systems had as a remedy for the immorality and disorder of the industrial city, and as a space to heal the sick through the "restorative power of nature." The planner was at the forefront of the "City Beautiful" movement, which advocated for a "tamed and managed" nature to alleviate social ills. Olmsted's experience developing parks in New York City, Buffalo, Brooklyn, and Chicago highlighted the value greenspaces had in the industrial city.

The city contracted Olmsted's firm in 1891 to design and develop three of the six original park sites, all located in the wealthy fringes of Milwaukee. Seemingly unaware of the high land values, Olmsted's initial report was critical of the park sites selected by the board, disapproving of their distance from the city center.⁵⁰ Lake Park is the most distinctly Olmstedian of the three sites, consisting of large meadows, rolling hills, scenic vistas, and deep ravines. The construction of these parks involved a massive movement of earth that reshaped the natural topography of a space to create the idyllic 'City Beautiful' park.⁵¹ Located on the edge of an affluent neighborhood, the park overlooks Lake Michigan and is constructed in a way that encourages visitors to wander its curvilinear paths.

⁴⁹ Anderson, *Park Traditions*, 269-270.

⁵⁰ Anderson, 269.

⁵¹ Anderson, 265.



Frederick Law Olmsted-designed Lake Park (Photo dates to 1909)⁵²

Sociopolitical Contexts

Urban Planning in Progressive-Era Milwaukee

The Columbian Exposition in Chicago's legendary "White City" (1893) inspired architects and city planners nationwide to take on more ambitious projects. A precursor to the Progressive Era's urban beautification efforts, the Columbian Exposition "preceded a growing in Wisconsin in classical architecture and urban beautification."⁵³ Soon after, the "City Beautiful" cause became a national phenomenon advocating for beautification and monumental grandeur as a cure for the poverty and sickness caused by the tumultuous evolution of industry and urbanism in American cities.

⁵² Dolores Knopfelmacher, *Frederick Law Olmsted-designed Lake Park*, (Lake Park Friends), accessed August 3, 2021, <https://lakeparkfriends.org/history/>.

⁵³ McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier*, 4.

Modern city planning emerged from the turn-of-the-century "City Beautiful" movement, where planning had gained some legitimacy as "an enabler of higher forms of civic art and urban beautification."⁵⁴ As the need for planning was increasingly recognized, the growing movement split between two factions, one focused on professionalizing the field and the other on housing. Frederick Law Olmsted led the faction of planners advocating for professional planning; he wanted to refine the movement's technical aspects, set standards, and focus on inspiring moral behavior in the underclasses through the built environment.

Many of the leaders behind City Beautiful were upper-middle-class, anxious over the underclasses' abysmal living conditions and hoping to avoid the rise in class conflict seen in Europe. The movement sought to use beauty to educate and lift up the masses while reinforcing the inherent goodness of bourgeois virtues. The movement not only spawned the modern city planning profession but was also a significant influence in the creation of Milwaukee's initial parks and public health infrastructure, with the 1907 creation of the Metropolitan Planning Commission epitomizing Milwaukee's renewed interest in urban planning and beautification.

However, John McCarthy, in his book on planning and growth politics in Milwaukee, argues that the City Beautiful movement's impact, at least locally, played a relatively minor role in the midwestern city's planning history. Instead, McCarthy argues that Milwaukee's City Beautiful projects and plans were modest when compared to those enacted by other American cities, a fact that contributed to its "reputation for

⁵⁴ Still, *History of a City*, 303.

conservation and caution in the realm of grandiose civic projects.”⁵⁵ Although there are many reasons for the blunted impact of City Beautiful in Milwaukee, much can be traced back to the city planning faction that opposed Olmsted.

Challenging the Consensus

The views of Frederick Olmsted, and the wider City Beautiful movement, conflicted with an interpretation of planning as a remedy for the urban housing crisis held by activists like Mary Simkhovich and Benjamin Marsh, who were interested in relieving the congested urban core rather than civic beauty. Progressive-Era intellectuals saw poor housing and other environmental factors as the primary cause of poverty, instead of blaming the behavior of the poor as the reason for their hardship. Olmsted’s faction eventually won out, separating the planning and housing movements for good at the end of their 1911 conference.

Milwaukee was unique because it did not follow the national trend of the progressive era (1896–1916), which saw cities begin to abandon housing reform. That Emil Seidel, the city's first Socialist mayor (1910-1912), was an important member of the housing-focused activist faction, is one reason housing reform remained a primary goal of Milwaukee's progressives. Therefore, the city had not embarked on any grand comprehensive city plans in the "mold of Daniel Burnham's vision for Chicago." Instead, planners emphasized land use controls, cooperative housing, and decentralization.⁵⁶

Sewer Socialism

⁵⁵ McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier*, 8.

⁵⁶ Olson, *City Expansion and Suburban Spread*, 50.

The success of Milwaukee's Socialist party should also be understood as an aspect of the more significant municipal reform movement that swept the nation in response to the worldwide depression of the 1890s. Like other industrial cities, the rapid growth in population in the late 19th century, combined with inefficient government, led to numerous problems in Milwaukee. The growth led to a highly concentrated population living in slum-like conditions, alongside inadequate infrastructure throughout the inner-city, raising substantial political issues. As a result, there was a great desire for civil service reform and municipal ownership to overcome increasing corruption and profiteering.

Victor Berger, an Austrian American who had immigrated to the city in 1881, was one of the founding members of Milwaukee's Socialist party. A successful politician, in 1910, he would represent Milwaukee as the first Socialist elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.⁵⁷ For Berger, to build a Socialist party with broad appeal in Milwaukee, its program must shift to address the city's practical problems and counter the reputation of European radicalism that had hurt the popularity of the national party.⁵⁸ Many historians emphasize the reformist, rather than revolutionary, goals of Milwaukee's "Sewer Socialists." Distinguished from the national party, the word 'sewer' was used to insult Milwaukee socialists for being too focused on building robust city infrastructure, considered 'reformist' by more radical socialists. Therefore, the 1910 mayoral election of

⁵⁷ Michael E. Stevens, "Victor L. Berger," Encyclopedia of Milwaukee (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, February 21, 2020), <https://emke.uwm.edu/entry/victor-l-berger/>.

⁵⁸ Still, *History of a City*, 514.

Socialist candidate Emil Seidel is often considered a "[p]olitical, not a social event."⁵⁹ Yet, the reformist zeal of the Socialists gave Milwaukee a reputation for having a progressive municipal government, with international reform-oriented journals praising Seidel's plan to create a metropolitan-wide park system.⁶⁰ This progressive reputation would only grow nationally with the later 24-year incumbency of Milwaukee's second socialist mayor, Daniel Hoan, which caused many Americans to perceive the city as "socialistic," during the height of the first red scare. Despite perceptions, Milwaukee's Socialists only had control of the common council for a single two-year term in 1910-1912. By 1940, the city's socialists had meddled in the private sector, specifically in the fields of public utilities and entertainment, far less than Detroit, Cleveland, or New York.⁶¹

It's essential to make a note of why Milwaukee's Socialist party put such a strong emphasis on the city's outskirts. Daniel Hoan's inaugural address points out congestion as a "serious problem" and could only be solved by the "spreading out" of Milwaukee's population.⁶² Hoan's "spreading out" idea is rooted in the reform environment felt throughout the nation during the progressive era. Fears over industrialization, immigration, and urbanization prompted America to welcome professional urban planning. The father of Milwaukee's Park System, Charles Whitnall, viewed planning as a weapon to attack social ills, especially urban overcrowding.

⁵⁹ Still, 303.

⁶⁰ Still, 303.

⁶¹ McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier*; 4-19.

⁶² Still, *History of a City*, 566.

Creation of County Parks Commission

Financial difficulties were constant after the momentum of the first few years of the city park system's expansion, and by 1907 the "influential pioneers of the Christian Wahl era were gone."⁶³ In response to the efforts of a group of concerned Milwaukee area park supporters, the Wisconsin legislature of 1907 passed a bill allowing counties with a population of 150,000 or more—Milwaukee was the only County that qualified at the time—to create a seven-member park commission to be appointed by the Chairman of the County Board for staggered seven-year terms. The board was responsible for conducting a thorough study of the County to identify lands suitable for public use to create a comprehensive County Parks system.⁶⁴

After the County Parks Commission's formal creation by the Wisconsin State Legislature, a new generation of ambitious planners of a "more imaginative and broader vision promoted the creation of a countrywide system."⁶⁵ Charles B. Whitnall, a local florist and political activist within Milwaukee's rapidly expanding Socialist party, took charge of this new generation once he had been appointed to the newly created commission. Like the late Alexander Mitchell, Whitnall was intimately familiar with horticulture as 30,000 square feet of greenhouses sustained his floral business. Whitnall, who is often referred to alongside Wahl as the "father of the county's park system," had

⁶³ Anne W. Spirn, "Constructing Nature: The Legacy of Frederick Law Olmsted," in William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: Norton, 1995), 91-113; William H. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 24-25.

⁶⁴ Anderson, *Park Traditions*, 271.

⁶⁵ Anderson, 279.

become an advocate for keeping a park's natural topography after noticing classical park planners' tendency to level nature to create a flat plane.⁶⁶

Envisioning a future of endless growth, Whitnall embarked on a park expansion program on Milwaukee's outskirts, anticipating the future population's needs. Whitnall hoped that by establishing parks in Milwaukee's rural fringes, it would be possible to preserve a site's "natural topography" while providing the working class with recreation opportunities. Olmsted's earlier preference for centrally located parks stood in stark contrast with Whitnall's vision of the "importance of parkland in rural areas to meet future growth."⁶⁷ The socialist was further critical of Olmsted's parks which he saw as "elitist, artificial, and expensive." Under the leadership of Whitnall, a strong emphasis was put on sound planning and the "utilization of natural topography," leading to broad public and political approval for the County's Park system.

The Garden City movement heavily influenced Whitnall's choice to locate parks in the city's underdeveloped fringes. The Garden City, first conceived of by Ebenezer Howard, is a utopian method of urban planning where small, self-reliant communities composed of proportionate areas for industry, agriculture, and residences surrounded by a vast rural belt of land. Howard diverged with the wider Fabian Socialist belief in the importance of reinvesting in the central city and instead believed that the path towards socialism required constructing an entirely new kind of city.⁶⁸

Explaining his concept, Howard wrote:

⁶⁶ Anderson, 255.

⁶⁷ Anderson, 269.

⁶⁸ Anderson, 271.

Cities are new things comparatively, and city dwellers have had their roots only recently wrenched from the soil... to live in physical and mental health, it is necessary for them to return frequently to the soil again for invigoration and refreshment. For most people, the one opportunity for this comes thru parks.⁶⁹

However, the decentralized parks built by Whitnall were located far from the working-class inner-city dwellers that they were intended to serve, existing just as far from the urban core in 1930 as Olmsted's parks were in 1890. However, the planners diverged in their motivations for choosing their sites, with Olmsted desiring to provide spacious restful enclaves to walk through and Whitnall seeking to alleviate the density of Milwaukee's central city and help its working class.⁷⁰

By 1910, the existence of a public parks system, and the fact that a party committed to a significantly expanded concept of urban service was about to take power, broadly reflected a more significant concern by Milwaukee for its citizens' welfare. An ambitious land-buying program through the 1920s led to a rapid expansion of the County Parks system, adding more than 900 acres from 1920-1930, tripling the amount of parkland administered by the County.⁷¹ The ideal timing of these acquisitions helped the County weather the upcoming depression, during which neither the city nor the County would have had funds available to purchase land.

The Rise of Chicago

⁶⁹ Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1965), 46.

⁷⁰ Milwaukee Metropolitan Park Commission, "1st Annual Report," January 1909.

⁷¹ Lorne A. Platt. "Planning Ideology and Geographic Thought in the Early Twentieth century: Charles Whitnall's Progressive Era Park Designs for Socialist Milwaukee." *Journal of Urban History* 36, no. 6 (2010): 783. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144210374016>.

In 1871, the *Chicago Journal of Commerce* delivered a blow to Milwaukee's pride when it referred to the city as "that delightful little suburb to our north."⁷² The resulting back-and-forth between urban boosters in both cities reflected the anxiety of early Milwaukee during Chicago's rapid growth in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The exchange was characteristic of a competition between the two Midwestern cities, which waxed and waned throughout the 19th century, and it would not be settled until the importance of rail connection to city growth was recognized and Milwaukee gave up on its dreams of surpassing Chicago. As Still puts it, despite Milwaukee's aspirations, "there was no combatting the realities of geography and railroad engineering."⁷³

By 1935, developments in rail and air communication sizeable decreased travel time between large cities and led to closer contact with the nearby metropolis of Chicago, increasing the already outsized influence the larger city had on Milwaukee's social and economic history. Easy access to Chicago "drew Milwaukee into the orbit of the larger city" and facilitated Chicago's dominance of the latter in the commercial and financial sphere as well.⁷⁴ Additionally, the raw materials that had facilitated Milwaukee's rise were increasingly being siphoned off by the nearby Twin Cities and the Duluth-Superior port, both of which were becoming more accessible as rail lines were built throughout the nation.

City-County Consolidation Efforts

⁷² "Milwaukee is no Longer a Suburb of Chicago." *Evening Wisconsin*, Nov. 21, 1881.

⁷³ Still, *History of a City*, 343.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

Milwaukee was no exception to the growing trend in the urban economy of mechanization and specialization happening nationwide. By 1940, with slightly under 40% of the population engaged in manufacturing, the city remained one of the nation's most intensely industrial communities.⁷⁵ As a result, the Great Depression would hit Milwaukee particularly hard. The high industrial intensity and the concentration of the production of heavy, durable goods revealed the city's high sensitivity to the nation's economic changes. However, this period also saw the use of collective bargaining achieve an increase in wages for the Milwaukee worker.⁷⁶ In 1936, FDR's New Deal provided large amounts of federal aid for public works, allowing the city's park and playground program to advance over ten years ahead of schedule.⁷⁷

By the start of the 1930s, there was a considerable amount of overlap between the City and County's functions.⁷⁸ At the same time, the city's annexation program saw Milwaukee grow from 26 square miles in 1922 to 44 square miles in 1933.⁷⁹ Even so, there existed eighteen communities not controlled by Milwaukee yet still part of the County (Wauwatosa, Shorewood, West Allis, to name a few). In 1931, despite city and County residents voting in favor of consolidation, the legislature backed suburban officials whose jobs were threatened by the possible merger. However, Mayor Hoan

⁷⁵ William L. Slayton and Robert L. Filtzer. *Manufacturing in the Milwaukee Industrial Area Compared to Five Comparable Industrial Areas, 1929, 1931, 1933, 1935, 1937, 1939* / Board of Public Land Commissioners, City Planning Division. (Milwaukee, Wis: Board of Public Land Commissioners, City Planning Division, 1944).

⁷⁶ Still, *History of a City*, 433.

⁷⁷ Still, 485.

⁷⁸ Anderson, *Park Traditions*, 295.

⁷⁹ Joel Rast. "Annexation in Milwaukee: A Historical Institutionalist Approach." *Polity* 39 (2007): 55-78.

would bring up consolidation again in 1937, but this time the hope was to reduce taxes by transferring city departments to the County. The consolidation effort largely failed, but the efforts paved the way for the city park system's merger into the County's park system.⁸⁰

As stated above, the County Parks system would eventually absorb the “financially strapped city parks during the depression years in the 1930s.”⁸¹ Throughout much of its history, the city park system was “plagued by a lack of adequate financing,” and improvements to grounds and facilities declined after 1933; flower beds went unplanted, and lamps stayed off. Milwaukee saw turning their parks department over to the County as the only solution. In a 1936 April referendum on the potential merger, citizens had overwhelmingly voted in favor of the measure. The message was clear; it was “time for the city to get out of the park business.”⁸²

In November of 1936, Milwaukee would formally transfer all 1,498 acres of its parks, in 37 different locations, over to the County. The merger, furthermore, provided the County Parks system with two significant additions: the Washington Park Zoo and the Mitchell Park Horticultural Conservatory. Moreover, the Washington Park Zoo, started in 1892, had greatly expanded with the organization of the Zoological society in 1910.⁸³

⁸⁰ Still, *History of a City*, 560.

⁸¹ Still, 433.

⁸² Still, 564.

⁸³ Anderson, *Park Traditions*, 295.

Although Milwaukee embarked on its expansion of municipal services in the hopes of attracting population and industry, the campaign also reflected a greater concern for its citizen's welfare. The increased influence of Milwaukee's working class, organized by the Social Democrats, also contributed to the overhaul of city services. Bayrd Still argues that credit for the shift should go to those "civic-minded individuals, the press, and the numerous citizens' organizations within the metropolis itself that promoted the city's ever-widening concern for the safety, health, and comfort of its people."⁸⁴

In the United States, the meteoric rise of Milwaukee was less the exception and more the rule. With the closure of the frontier, the increasingly industrial nation was rapidly urbanizing. The haphazard growth of the industrial city, coupled with the inefficient organization of the state, led to a period of intensified struggle. In the 19th century, industrial capitalists like iron tycoon Edward P. Allis and wealthy banker Alexander Mitchell hugely influenced early Milwaukee's cultural developments. As the industrial capitalists of the Gilded Age accumulated an unprecedented amount of wealth, slums rose in the congested central city.

Until the city's unusually late development of a public park system in 1899, the recreational needs of residents were met by various private parks like Mitchell's Grove for the wealthy and beer gardens—introduced by German immigrants—for the city's working class. At the same time, the closing of the frontier had led to an increasing interest in preserving the "natural" world. The City Beautiful movement, for example, sought to tame nature and use it as a tool to impart morals on the working class. It was thought that through nature's "solitude and beauty," the problems caused by urbanism and

⁸⁴ Anderson, 282.

industrialization might be alleviated. The paternalistic and reformist elitism of this era sought to impose the values of the petit-bourgeois on a morally bankrupt underclass. Despite this, movements like City Beautiful were responding to the genuine problem of urban poverty.

The emergence of even bigger, more vibrant, and dangerous cities seemed to be an inevitability, and, as a result, the burdens of growth and the potentials of reform dominated the discourse on the American city.⁸⁵ The explosive population growth, and the blight it engendered, were cause for concern in the still mostly rural United States of the late 19th century. While reformers searched for ways to eliminate corruption, they also looked to broaden municipal services, attack congestion and slums, and facilitate the transportation of workers through the construction of expressways.⁸⁶ Soon, the increasingly stratified society strengthened working-class consciousness and caused widespread labor unrest. In Milwaukee, labor unrest took shape in the form of its "Sewer Socialists," whose progressive politics sought to correct the excesses of the age through reform rather than revolution. The industrial city was characterized by its working-class politics and the distinct cultural traditions brought by early German immigration. In this era, the city's visionaries and socialist reformers successfully established a public parks system in 1898. At the time, the Parks Board purchased land for five parks; one of these areas, purchased from the influential Mitchell family, would eventually house the conservatory.

⁸⁵ Beauregard, *Voices of Decline*, 60

⁸⁶ Beauregard, 68

Chapter 2: Postwar Milwaukee

The Machine Shop of the World

During the period between the end of World War II and the beginning of the 1973-1975 recession, the world experienced an unusually high and sustained level of economic expansion, one of the greatest in human history. This period, also known as the "American Century," began with the United States emerging from the war as the world's dominant political, economic, and cultural power. World War II had effectively wiped away the unemployment and industrial decline faced by U.S. cities during the depression by reinvigorating once vacant factories with defense contracts. From 1945 to 1975, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the U.S. rose from \$228 billion to \$1.7 trillion, accounting for 35% of the world's economic output.¹ Industrial employment in Milwaukee alone grew from 110,000 in 1940 to 200,000 by 1943.² To John Gurda, the region's premier public historian, the postwar period was "Milwaukee at its pinnacle."³ In many respects, Gurda is correct; the high-growth 1950s ended with the city's population growing to its all-time high of 741,324 residents in 1960.⁴

Despite the 1950s, in retrospect, being characterized as a time of constant growth in American cities, the reality becomes more complex when focusing on different

¹ Stephen A. Marglin and Juliet B. Schor, "The Golden Age of Capitalism." *Clarendon Press*, (1991), 1.

² Richard L. Pifer, "A City at War: Milwaukee Labor During World War Two," *Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Press*, 2002.

³ Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee*, 352.

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau. *Population and Housing*, Milwaukee, 1960. (Accessed June 12, 2021).

regions. In fact, the postwar economic boom saw Midwestern cities experience much slower growth when compared to their counterparts in the southern and western parts of the United States. The older industrial cities of the Midwest and Northeast had been hit hard during the Great Depression. The resulting austerity measures led to “deferred maintenance and anemic investment in public facilities throughout the 1930s.”⁵ World War II offered little respite, as it caused a halt in new construction, activities, and in everything other than essential infrastructure repairs. For a time, the intense wartime metal demand in America did rejuvenate Milwaukee’s manufacturing economy. However, the seeming industrial resurgence was a façade, and the boost from the nation’s wartime economy “ultimately masked fundamental shifts in the Midwest’s economic trajectory.”⁶ Years of neglect had left cities financially weak, despite the increasingly urgent need to “undertake massive investments to eliminate blight and slums” to stem out-migration. This exodus accelerated with the implementation of the 1944 Veterans Administration (V.A.) home loan program which guaranteed millions of single-family home loans, alongside a host of other federal and state policies incentivizing suburbanization.⁷

In Milwaukee, industrial growth was further blunted when the city ran out of space for its expanding industries, forcing them to look to the city’s suburbs and exurbs when building new factories.⁸ Compounding these problems, the city’s fervent

⁵ Beauregard, *Voices of Decline*, 126.

⁶ Thomas Jablonsky. “Devil in the Details: A Rust Belt City’s Progression.” *Journal of Urban History*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, (2018), 1300.

⁷ Beauregard, *Voices of Decline*, 120.

⁸ McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier*, 134.

construction of highways had further exacerbated the decentralization of manufacturing by cutting the city into pieces. To the city's progressive government, the automobile's arrival was heralded as an unambiguous good, a technology that would usher in an era of greater equality by relieving inner-city congestion while giving working-class people the mobility that had until then been a privilege enjoyed solely by the upper classes.

Highways allowed easy access to downtowns yet also simultaneously made it easier to exit from those same spaces. The access provided by these newly constructed highways influenced the decisions of developers to build shopping malls and office complexes away from the city.⁹ At the beginning of the 20th century, suburbanization was often portrayed as a natural consequence of population growth, which urban progressives wanted to encourage. However, it would not be long before the danger of decentralization became clear.

Although the debate over the state of American cities at the end of the 1950s still rages, scholars point out that the impact of industrial decentralization had already been draining jobs from Milwaukee long before the broader deindustrialization of the United States. Although there is little doubt that the 1950s were a time of growth, the suburbs, not the city, were increasingly the recipients of this rising economic tide. At the time, regional cooperation was needed to ensure future industrial development would occur within Milwaukee's borders, yet political fragmentation and distrust between the business community and the progressive-minded city officials continued. Soon, a large influx of African Americans would arrive in Milwaukee, seeking the same opportunities that had

⁹ Findlay, *Magic Lands*, 2823

propelled so many white immigrants into the middle class. However, those arriving would find the city at an economic crossroads and themselves increasingly concentrated in a declining central city surrounded by white-only suburbs.¹⁰

Urban Renewal in Milwaukee

The Regimeless City

Among cities in the United States, Milwaukee stood out for several reasons; chief among them was its resistance to 'City Beautiful' and Urban Renewal's emphasis on reinvesting in the central city. Postwar Milwaukee's urban renewal efforts pale in comparison to places like Detroit and St. Louis, where entire cultural districts, meant to act as second downtowns, rose in the name of urban renewal. Such urban renewal efforts often involved the large-scale clearance of slums in blighted central areas, with cities moving their occupants into massive public housing blocs. One explanation for Milwaukee's divergent urban planning can be found in regime theory.

Regime theory argues that the relative success of a city's efforts at urban development depends on the presence of "growth coalitions," where civic elites and officials connect with local private business interests to form new urban 'regimes' capable of better wielding power in the postwar city.¹¹ Moreover, those cities with effective public-private regimes could better harness the postwar increase in federal funding for use on large-scale civic projects. In Chicago, Atlanta, and Pittsburgh, newly formed public-private regimes proved able to implement extensive urban renewal efforts that

¹⁰ McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier*, 192.

¹¹ John Mollenkopf, *The Contested City*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983).

sparked "downtown renaissances," with the media lavishing attention on the construction of "showcase civic projects," as they produced tangible results in the increasingly desperate fight to preserve the American city. The urban renewal narrative, with its focus on the central city, remains influential to this day.¹²

Milwaukee's story is unique because its policymakers clung to older strategies "to plan and reshape the city" during the postwar period.¹³ Public policy theory and socially progressive ideas continued to hold sway long after socialist Mayor Daniel Hoan's defeat in 1940. Additionally, after developing the County parkway system, the socialist park planner Charles Whitnall's belief in planned decentralization as a solution to urban congestion had become part of Milwaukee's urban fabric.¹⁴

However, these progressive ideas were now in competition with a downtown-focused coalition of private sector leaders and city elites. While progressives were having more and more trouble with their efforts at annexation, urban real estate developers, elected officials, and civic boosters placed their hopes in redeveloping blighted downtowns as a method to reverse the increasingly dire state of old industrial cities.¹⁵ To counter the increasing trend towards decentralization, civic elites felt there was a need for a solid central urban planning focus that could act as a magnet able to hold the metropolitan area together. Organized business interests funded planning studies to find ways to reverse the course of decline while committing resources to various downtown

¹² Beauregard, *Voices of Decline*, 120.

¹³ McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier*, 114.

¹⁴ McCarthy, 115.

¹⁵ Beauregard, *Voices of Decline*, 142.

redevelopment projects. Advocates for urban renewal met increasing resistance from public housing-focused progressives who resented the move by real-estate interests to center the discourse solely on blight and land values in the Central Business Districts (CBD).¹⁶

For many cities, one of the earliest solutions to urban decline and decentralization seemed to lie in the annexation of their surrounding communities. In Milwaukee, annexation was pursued with a uniquely intense vigor during the Zeidler administration. Early on, the city's annexation efforts found success by leveraging access to its municipal water services. Although these brute-force methods worked for a time, it soon became apparent that the city no longer had the political power to annex any further as their suburbs grew increasingly defiant and better organized.¹⁷ One housing expert, writing on the danger posed by regional fragmentation in 1953, put it this way "... it is safe to say, nearly all of our major cities are strangled by a circumferential band of separately organized suburbs."¹⁸ Suburbanites resisting annexation soon represented a powerful third faction, opposing the metropolitan planning goals of both organized business and the progressive city government, only heightening the conflict over power in Milwaukee. These three groups were in constant dispute over housing, redevelopment, industrial growth, and control of metropolitan governance.¹⁹

¹⁶ Beauregard, 143.

¹⁷ Beauregard, 128.

¹⁸ Miles Coleon, *Renewing Our Cities*, (New York, The Twentieth century Fund, 1953), 73.

¹⁹ McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier*, 121.

As a result of these conflicts, Milwaukee, unlike its peer cities, had trouble forming effective public-private regimes.²⁰ The Urban Land Institute's 1940 report on downtown Milwaukee revealed a vast difference between how the city's private sector conceived of growth and how its Socialist municipal government imagined it. The socialists focused on their pursuit of "horizontal expansion" through the annexation of the neighboring region, improving the housing stock, and enacting democratic reforms that would allow the city's utilities to be publicly controlled. The focus on annexation and housing conflicted with the private downtown association's belief in Adam Smith's "unseen hand of the market" as a method to solve all social problems. Instead, the business elite focused on urban renewal and redeveloping the city's downtown as a method of increasing land values.²¹

The Debt Referendum Campaign

In 1945, at a meeting of business leaders newly concerned with economic decline downtown, Milwaukee's first private-sector coalition was formed. The purpose of the new "1948 Corporation" was to safeguard against any potential decline in land values, something its leaders believed would result from Milwaukee's conservative urban planning policy. To counter this decline, the 1948 Corporation firmly pushed for Milwaukee to go back into debt, something the city, guided by the socialists, had avoided since the Great Depression, to finance various public improvements. The group's

²⁰ Joel Rast. "Governing the Regimeless City: The Frank Zeidler Administration in Milwaukee, 1948–1960." *Urban affairs review* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.) 42, no. 1 (2006): 81–112.

²¹ McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier*, 145.

lobbying brought the issue to a citywide referendum in 1947, asking residents whether the city should reissue bonds.

The ‘Keep Milwaukee Debt Free Committee,’ composed of Milwaukee’s dwindling Socialist party, represented the main opposition to the debt referendum. Although the Sewer Socialists proved remarkably hardy, a testament to the party’s ability to adapt to their American setting, the first Red Scare alongside an increasingly effective opposition mounted by an alliance of the city’s Republican and Democratic parties took its toll, causing the party to flounder throughout the 1930s. Despite the Socialist party’s fall from grace, Milwaukee’s large and politically active working class had struggled against industrial capitalism for decades, and it would take time for the political culture responsible for electing progressives like Daniel Hoan to dissipate entirely.²² At this point, the social democrats’ most prominent member was Frank Zeidler, who would become Milwaukee’s third, and most recent, Socialist mayor.²³

The Greater Milwaukee Committee (GMC) Ascendant

Despite the objection of many city officials, including then-mayor John Bohn, the debt referendum passed on April 1, 1947, with 56.9% of the 94,965 votes cast in favor of the measure.²⁴ The Greater Milwaukee Committee (GMC), a permanent offshoot of the 1948 Corporation, would continue the corporation’s quest to find and implement policy solutions capable of sustaining the economic growth that the wartime boom engendered. With the passage of the debt referendum, the committee then pushed for various capital

²² McCarthy, 121.

²³ McCarthy, 191.

²⁴ “Voters Give Mandate to Improve City,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Apr. 3, 1947.

improvement projects, including a veteran's war memorial, an art museum along the lakefront, an expansion of the Milwaukee Public Library, and a system of expressways to improve transportation within Milwaukee County, all publicly funded through government bonds.

The GMC, which had quickly grown into one of the city's most influential civic groups, saw itself as a mediator between Milwaukee and its suburbs, regarding the conflicts between them as an impediment to economic development and, ultimately, a distraction preventing Milwaukee from rebuilding its downtown, a process that was well underway in many peer cities.²⁵ In the past, influential civic groups like the City Club had generally supported the city's annexation policies. However, the City Club's membership and impact on local politics had been long on the wane; groups like the GMC had far greater influence over civic affairs.²⁶

As the city's "most influential group of civic elites," the GMC spearheaded the redevelopment efforts in Milwaukee's central city.²⁷ The committee thought downtown renewal should take priority over any efforts to build public housing, a policy which, once again, put them at odds with the progressive Zeidler administration. Because of these disagreements, any serious efforts at mediation were undercut by the Zeidler administration, who saw the civic group as having a suburban slant and, therefore, did not trust their intentions.²⁸

²⁵ McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier*, 206

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ McCarthy, 191.

²⁸ McCarthy, 203.

Despite being given the cold shoulder by the Zeidler administration, the GMC wielded a tremendous amount of power during this period, often bypassing city, county, and suburb through their powerful connections to the state legislature.²⁹ The state legislature's creation of the Metropolitan Study Commission (MSC) illustrates the far reach of the GMC. In 1957, the GMC sought to fund an "independent research firm" to "examine key issues" the city and its suburbs faced. It was not long before the committee had successfully lobbied for the MSC's creation in the state legislature, retaining the sole power to name the board members over the objection of the Zeidler administration.³⁰

The GMC's proposed public improvement program was in full swing by the end of the 1950s; with the construction of Milwaukee County Stadium (1953), the lakefront memorial (1957), the Milwaukee Public Museum (1962), and a library addition (1957) all finished or nearing completion as the decade drew to a close.³¹ The postwar economy continued to boom, and the GMC anxiously pushed for civic projects that might sustain it.

Craig Peterson, once a political consultant for the GMC, explained the thought process behind the committee's urban renewal efforts:

The whole goal was that these folks wanted to attract high-caliber talent. See, Milwaukee had an inferiority complex to Chicago, and the GMC recognized that. You know, the feeling was that if you didn't have these amenities [cultural facilities like the Domes], then you weren't as attractive as say a Boston or Atlanta or Dallas or Los Angeles and Chicago were. So, in the sixties, we saw the addition of the art museum, we saw the addition of the Milwaukee ballet, and in

²⁹ McCarthy, 207.

³⁰ McCarthy, 204.

³¹ McCarthy, 230.

the early seventies, we saw the symphony orchestra, which provided us with an ability to compete with them.³²

The Resurrection of the Conservatory

Built in 1898, at almost sixty years of age, the old conservatory building finally “bowed to the savages of time and age” in 1955.³³ To visitors, evidence of the building's deterioration had become evident in the rusting overhead beams, the rotting wood, and the presence of a structural support propping up the conservatory’s west wing. The facility’s industrial surroundings led to additional challenges, with one Milwaukee Sentinel noting how: “dirt blows into the conservatory buildings from the trains and industry of the Menominee River valley.”³⁴ Following a particularly violent windstorm, the County Parks Commission closed the facility due to unsafe conditions for the last time on July 8, 1955.³⁵ Only a year prior, another windstorm had shattered over forty glass panes.³⁶

News coverage eulogizing the facility noted its place as a Milwaukee ‘favorite,’ not only due to the “beauty of its displays” but also in its ability to educate the “less versed.”³⁷ In addition, the County Parks Commission praised its ability to provide “precious greenspace” for the public during the long winter months and its convenient location near the center of Milwaukee's population. Over 337,000 people had visited the

³² Craig Peterson (former political consultant for the GMC), in discussion with author, Mar. 2021.

³³ “Flower Haven Closes Doors: Conservatory Unsafe,” *Milwaukee Journal*, July 11, 1955.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ “Mitchell Park Conservatory Closes Sunday,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 9, 1955.

³⁶ “Danger Seen to Greenhouse,” *Milwaukee Journal*, Apr. 17, 1954.

³⁷ “Nostalgic Words----Mitchell Park Conservatory ‘Obituary,’” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 10, 1955.

conservatory in 1952, more than the entire population of Milwaukee when the structure was built in 1898.³⁸

A Conservatory for the "Milwaukee of Today"

In a 1954 editorial written for the Milwaukee Sentinel, the County Parks Commission outlined their vision for a new conservatory. The structure would house not only showrooms for flower displays but also educational units such as lecture hall(s) and "exhibitions of coffee plants, rubber trees and other vegetable life that contributes vitally to the economic welfare of the public but is not familiar to Milwaukeeans."³⁹ The landmark would be constructed with "glass, aluminum, and the like," as the use of modern materials was deemed crucial to ensure the new horticultural conservatory would be "appropriate for the Milwaukee of today, and the next half century." The editorial ends with a plea for charity, with the board writing, "[h]ow wonderful it would be if some wealthy, public spirited Milwaukee individual, family, or organization would offer to give the community such a conservatory, as happened in Cincinnati."⁴⁰

Soon after the 1955 closure of the old conservatory, the County Board of Supervisors voted to provide \$1 million towards constructing a new facility. News of the board's decision set in motion a struggle between the Aldermen over possible new locations, all arguing in favor of relocating the facility into their wards. Some saw Milwaukee's downtown as a better location. One letter to the *Milwaukee Journal* argued

³⁸ See footnote 32.

³⁹ "Danger Seen to Greenhouse: May Blow Down," *Milwaukee Journal*, Apr. 11, 1954.

⁴⁰ "Milwaukee New Conservatory Fine Idea; Old One Is About Through," *Milwaukee Journal*, Apr. 19, 1954.

that a new building, consisting of a horticultural conservatory and a theatre, should instead be constructed downtown. In response to these proposals, a public movement to keep the conservatory in Mitchell Park began. Ultimately, once the County selected an architect, it was decided that the new greenhouse would remain at Mitchell Park.⁴¹

Designing the Domes

On June 14, 1957, two years after the County shut down the old facility, and out of a field of 23 candidates and firms, architect Donald L. Grieb was selected by the parks commission to design the new conservatory. Some of the locally-based architect's recent works included: Congregation Shalom temple, the Saxony restaurant, and the Glendale municipal building. Grieb had won the American Academy of Rome award in architecture in 1941 and received a fellowship from the University of Pennsylvania.⁴² The County also hired Stanley C. Fall, a florist and University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee researcher who studied methods of growing plants under glass, to advise Grieb.⁴³

Not long after, on June 19, 1958, the County Parks Commission approved a two-phase construction plan with an estimated cost of \$2.4 million, over \$22 million in 2021 dollars, for the new conservatory.⁴⁴ At the time, plans for the new conservatory called for “five glass domes nestled like an ultra-modern Eskimo village” next to the already existing Sunken Gardens. The forward two domes would be the ‘show’ house and the ‘tropical’ house. The “two glass houses” at the entrance would be half surrounded by

⁴¹ “Lock Conservatory at Mitchell Park,” *The Times* (Milwaukee), July 14, 1955.

⁴² “Donald Grieb To Design Park Conservatory,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 15, 1957.

⁴³ “County Blazes New Trail in Conservatory,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Mar. 1, 1958.

⁴⁴ “Plan Dome House Conservatory,” *Milwaukee Journal*, June 20, 1958.

water, with Grieb suggesting two fountains be placed at the approach. Separating the two forward domes, a “structure of nine arches” would contain conservatory offices and an enclosed lobby. The ‘arid’ house, alongside a smaller glass transition house, sat behind the other domes.

Temperate, tropical, and arid domes were included in the original project approved by the County Supervisors. Unrealized plans also included a fourth dome exclusively dedicated to a temperate climate alongside a horticultural hall. Milwaukee’s private gardening club federation proposed the call for a horticultural hall to be built. The hall would provide exhibition space, meeting rooms, and offices for the private groups. Additionally, the hall would “make it possible for Milwaukee to attract national conventions of leading horticultural groups.”⁴⁵ Despite some attention given to the idea in local papers, future delays and cost overruns on the original three domes would dash any hopes for a potential fourth dome or the dedicated horticultural hall. In the latter half of 1958, the plan would be reduced to the three main domes and a transition house standing in Mitchell Park today.⁴⁶

A Modern Marvel

In discussing a model version of the conservatory and the nearby Sunken Gardens greeting visitors at the entrance, Howard W. Gregg, general manager of parks, explained the model’s purpose as a demonstration of “how the old and the new can live side by side

⁴⁵ “Garden Clubs Ask for Hall,” *Milwaukee Journal*, May 17, 1956.

⁴⁶ “2 Conservatory Glass Domes OKd,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 20, 1958.

and produce a complete and beautiful whole.”⁴⁷ The display’s emphasis on the modernist elements of the facility mirrored a general theme that celebrated the three domes of the Mitchell Park Horticultural Conservatory as the “most modern conservatory in the United States.”⁴⁸

The construction of the Domes made extensive use of modern materials like concrete, aluminum, glass, and plastic. Over 115,000 square feet of quarter-inch-thick plate glass cover the 120,000 linear feet of aluminum extrusions, constructed to allow maximum sunlight to reach the plants inside. The concrete dome substructure was also highly innovative during a time when architects were experimenting with the limits of concrete, although it has suffered in the moist environment since. The 'Domes' are technically not domes in the geometric sense, as they are taller than wide. With a radius of 70 feet and a height of 85 feet, they are distinguished from Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome, with Grieb instead referring to them as conoidal or beehive-shaped structures. The newly constructed Domes were further praised as “unique, bold, and aesthetic in design, it is the first major innovation in conservatory design in 250 years.”⁴⁹ The Domes were designed and built with the elevation of Milwaukee’s image internationally in mind, as Grieb stating the project’s explicit intention to “deviate from convention.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Avery Wittenberger, “Domed Flower House to Open,” *Milwaukee Journal*, Dec. 6, 1964.

⁴⁸ “Parks, Recreation and Culture Functions,” *Milwaukee Journal*, Oct. 29, 1967.

⁴⁹ “Your Milwaukee... Moving Ahead,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Apr. 26, 1965.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

In 1961, Howard E. Brossman, the 33-year botanical supervisor of Mitchell Park, promoted the still-under-construction Domes as a “work of art, highly functional and aesthetically pleasing.”⁵¹ On approaching the conservatory, the supervisor noted that visitors would walk across a 60-foot-wide plaza, which crossed a large semicircular reflecting pool mirroring the domes before being greeted by an “ultramodern lobby and office building.” The three massive domes are reinforced concrete and tempered glass, each 140-feet in diameter and 85-feet high in the center.

Soon after construction began in 1961, the new Milwaukee County Conservatory was heralded as “something very, very new in concept as well as design.” At this point, the Domes still needed to be covered with a “skin of triangular glass sections on an aluminum framework to be set several inches out from the concrete lacework.”⁵² The new design was further praised for being “substantially larger” and “more versatile” than the old facility. The domes, once completed, would contain 36,000 square feet of plantable area. Brossman explained that he “insisted on wide walks... we have hopes of being able to handle between 1,500 and 2,000 visitors at a time.” Brossman concluded by explaining that the “circuitous walks and botanical displays will be so arranged that one will get the feeling he is alone to commune with nature... You will be looking at plants, not other people.”⁵³

Howard Gregg, director of Mitchell Park, explained that the first dome built would be the show house, a facility to host rotating flower shows, exhibits, and display

⁵¹ Bruce Wuttken, “Mitchell Domes to ‘Bloom’ by ’63,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Sept. 4, 1961.

⁵² “Milwaukee—The New Conservatory Will Be Well Worth Waiting For,” *Milwaukee Journal*, Aug. 9, 1961.

⁵³ Bruce Wuttken, “Mitchell Domes to ‘Bloom’ by ’63,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Sept. 4, 1961.

plants and flowers from the more moderate climates, including plants of “commercial importance.”⁵⁴ The second dome would contain the main entrance lobby, administration offices, and the arid plants of the desert biome. The final dome, furthest right, would hold a tropical biome, a “rainforest” dome housing exotic flora. Although the locations of the structures would stay the same, the slow growth of plants for the arid dome would cause the eventual reversal of this timeline, leading to the tropical dome’s completion ahead of the arid building.⁵⁵

The structure itself radically departs from conventional conservatory design. In an interview with the *Milwaukee Journal*, Gregg explained that the “aim has been to create something not only unique and striking, but with new and important advantages over the old and, if possible, no offsetting disadvantages.”⁵⁶ The design itself was wholly unique, with Grieb obtaining a patent for the structure in 1965. However, the fabrication of the precast concrete proved more complex than Grieb had theorized; unlike the geodesic structure used in other conservatory projects, the horizontal and vertical parts of the Domes differed in length.⁵⁷ The concrete structure, without identical measurements, could not be fabricated without considering the direction each piece would be installed—a crucial aspect in the economic viability of the geodesic dome.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ “Milwaukee—The New Conservatory Will Be Well Worth Waiting For,” *Milwaukee Journal*, Aug. 9, 1961.

⁵⁵ “Mitchell Park Conservatory Construction to Start in Spring,” *Milwaukee Journal*, Feb. 17, 1959.

⁵⁶ “Milwaukee—The New Conservatory Will Be Well Worth Waiting For,” *Milwaukee Journal*, Aug. 9, 1961.

⁵⁷ Eugene C. Harrington, “Moisture, Light and Heat Vital Factors in Plan of Mitchell Park Structures,” *Milwaukee Journal*, (June 24, 1962). Most notably, Buckminster Fuller’s geodesic dome had just been used to great effect in the Missouri Botanical Garden’s newly built ‘Climatron’ conservatory.

⁵⁸ “World’s First Space Frames Rise in Milwaukee,” reprint from *Milwaukee Engineering*, May 4, 1961.

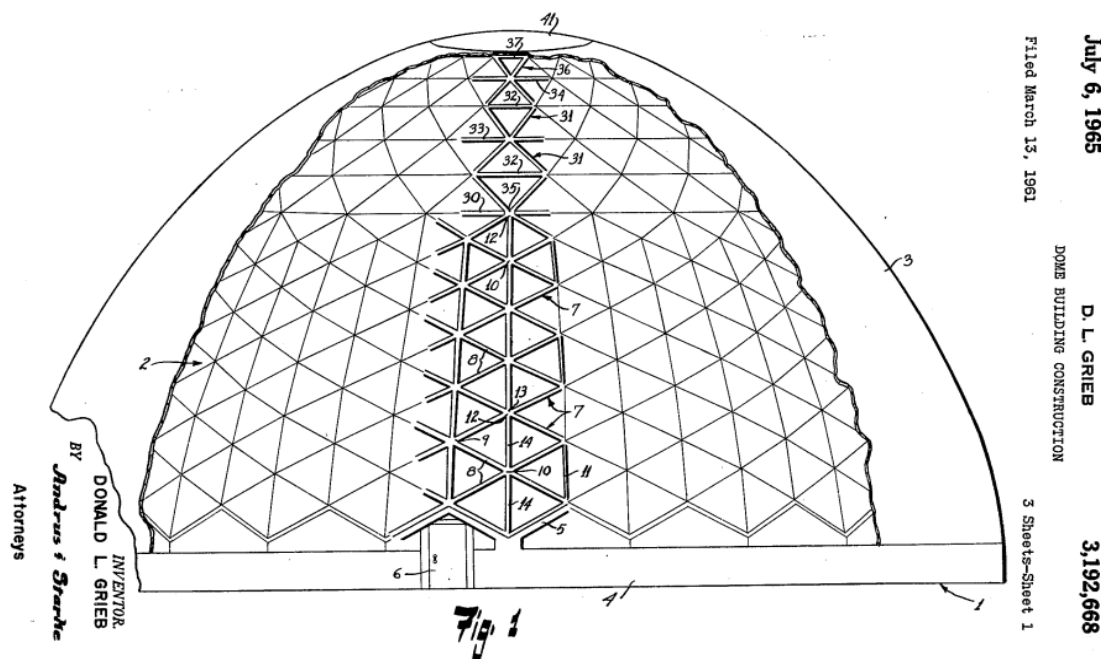


Diagram of dome structural shapes from U.S. Patent drawing (US3192668A)

Cultural Contexts

Modernism and the Temple of Science

The Domes' architect, Donald L. Grieb, speaking at a conference of the engineers and scientists of Milwaukee Inc., predicted that a “new age of plastics in building construction is on the horizon.” Grieb went on to accuse architects and builders of a paranoia engendered by “unimaginative codes” that govern the use of new materials. The versatility of plastics was “practically boundless,” but to fulfill the promise of its possibilities, the “human element of fear (of new materials) must be broken.”⁵⁹ Grieb pointed to the Mitchell Park Domes as an example of codes infringing on architecture. “Those should have been plastic domes,” he said, “which could have been built for

⁵⁹ “Code Restrictions on New Plastics Criticized,” *Milwaukee Journal*, Apr. 3, 1966.

\$50,000,” rather than the \$4,000,000 price tag eventually reached. “Concrete is far too heavy for the future in architecture,” he said, “and, though it does have a place in construction, it will fast disappear in the light of plastic materials.”⁶⁰

Grieb felt that the "rectangular box building" would become a thing of the past. Instead, he believes that the "soft" profile and circle linear shapes of space exploration vehicles will become the model for future buildings. These new concepts in structure will need new building materials. Plastics is a material Grieb is "high" on, according to one *Milwaukee Sentinel* article.⁶¹ Grieb continues to wildly speculate about a future where plastic tubes run underneath the Earth, transporting vehicles and water throughout the world before concluding that "[w]e must be plastic, as well, in our thinking in a changing world," Grieb said, “and I believe plastics can meet the need of the expansive future.” Explaining that creativity and the use of new materials should be a part of an architect's education, Grieb went on to argue that "the space age has given men a new outlook, this should be reflected in his buildings and eventually it will."

The completed Domes reflect the strongly independent nature of their designer, alongside Grieb's dedication to the midcentury Modern architectural style popular at the time. Specifically, the structures were influenced by New Formalism (Philip Johnson's Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, 1961) and Neo-Expressionism (Eero Saarinen's Dulles International Airport, Chantilly, Virginia, 1960) were key influences for Grieb.⁶² Minneapolis architect Vincent James, one of Grieb's contemporaries who is

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ “Civic Center Plan Author Worried,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Sept. 5, 1966.

⁶² “New Horticultural Conservatory in Mitchell Park.” *Journal of the American Institute of Park Executives, Inc.* Sept. 1965.

now internationally renowned, had this to say about the designer of the iconic Domes:
 "Grieb was a self-styled visionary, as idealistic as he was idiosyncratic, I am confident
 the Jetsons would have loved some of his buildings."⁶³



Concrete entrance elements at "The Domes,"⁶⁴

Today, it can be hard to understand Grieb's comments. They seem almost comical in hindsight. Nevertheless, the Domes evoke the era they were built in, the spirit of American exceptionalism and its optimism is expressed through midcentury Modern's architectural form. Understanding the larger context behind the 1950s era vision of an

⁶³ Mary Louise Schumacher, "The Singular Vision and Big Ambition of Domes Architect Donald Grieb," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Feb. 26, 2016.

⁶⁴ *Entrance to the Domes*. January 13, 2020. Photograph taken by Author.

affluent future, a vision that radiates off the Domes, can provide insight into the design philosophy.

The Space Age

In 1957, only a year before the initial plans for the Domes were approved, the Western world was rocked by the unexpected launch of the Earth's first artificial satellite by the Soviet Union. The October launch of *Sputnik 1* "seemed to demand that the United States display its own technological and scientific prowess."⁶⁵ The launch of Sputnik acted as the most powerful symbol of postwar rivalry in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as the flight caused an intense fear that the United States was falling behind the Soviet Union technologically. Consequentially, the development of scientific resources was deemed an issue of national security. A need to show the world how American science contributed to peace through the creation of abundance arose.⁶⁶

As John Findlay puts it:

During the late 1950s and early 1960s... Sputnik stood as the most powerful symbol of Cold War rivalry. The desire to catch up to the Soviets as quickly as possible motivated much of the federal government's interest in educational reform, military reorganization, and other new frontiers in the years after 1957.⁶⁷

The 1962 Seattle World's Fair was a seminal moment in American history and represented several changes occurring in the United States at the end of the 1950s. The fair was meant to convey and celebrate the country's scientific achievements, especially

⁶⁵ Findlay, *Magic Lands*, 2911.

⁶⁶ Findlay, 2906.

⁶⁷ Findlay, 2937-2938.

when it came to space exploration.⁶⁸ A joyful celebration based on growth, technology, and defense spending, the space-age orientation of the time can be seen clearly in the monumental Space Needle, with several features dating the facility as belonging to the Cold War era. Namely, precast concrete panels and other modern materials in the construction process were deemed crucial.

By the time the Seattle World's Fair was held in 1962, it had been over two decades since the last world's fair in the United States. Seattle deviated from the past world's fairs which conveyed an "elite ideology regarding race and empire to many classes, especially to workers," and was instead designed to appeal to the growing middle class.⁶⁹ Americans increasingly valued their leisure time as "more than an opportunity for pleasure and escape."⁷⁰ Instead, there was an increasing interest in educational leisure activities meant to cultivate new skills and values.

The future presented at the Seattle World's Fair was an exciting one. Their predictions assumed that the upward trend towards affluence experienced during the postwar boom period in the United States would continue without end. In the future, urban and rural landscapes would become highly organized, there would be a more robust and efficient economy, and an increased amount of leisure time that would also be used more purposefully. The 21st century would be a time of greater productivity, free time, and autonomy. Increased mechanization and organization would "heighten productivity,

⁶⁸ Findlay, 2751.

⁶⁹ Findlay, 3059.

⁷⁰ Findlay, 3087.

minimize drudgery, and enhance creativity.”⁷¹ Science would allow humanity to master its surroundings and establish order among itself fully.⁷²

Findlay, in his book on postwar “Magic Lands,” explains that this vision of the future:

[B]elonged, not to the doubting, pluralistic 1960s, but to a culture that had not really overturned the assumptions of white, middle-aged, middle-class males, which had made the 1950s appear a decade of consensus. The fair embodied a mentality that took for granted that the future would be better than today and that increase equaled improvement, particularly in the realms of science and consumption... The future in 1962 appeared as a richer, easier, and speedier version of the present-not as one in which cultural values and social relationships had changed, and not as one in which there existed significant limitations to America's global power and natural environment.⁷³

Delays, Cost Overruns, and Regional Fragmentation

Almost immediately, the construction of the Domes faced budget difficulties.

Internal problems plagued the project, with disputes between County officials, tax levies, and other public funding stressors leading to various delays. In 1958, County Parks Commissioners approved a two-phase construction plan with an estimated cost of 2.4 million (\$22,011,887 in 2021 dollars). At this point, Grieb and other County park planners had spent the last year solving the “complex problem of capturing the proper amount of sunlight for the varied plant life that is shown,” and the entire project was expected to take just two years.⁷⁴ However, the project suffered a significant setback later that year after the County Parks Commission mishandled \$400,000 in bonds. Months of "squabbling over financing the Mitchell Park Conservatory" might have been avoided as

⁷¹ Findlay, 3199.

⁷² Findlay, 3019.

⁷³ Findlay, 3258-3263.

⁷⁴ “Conservatory Plans Revised,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Feb. 6, 1959.

\$900,000 in bonds had been authorized in the 1956 budget, but only \$500,000 worth was ever sold.⁷⁵

Throughout the project, it was clear that, for the County, building the new zoo took priority. The extensive capital improvements required budgeting for not only the new horticultural facility, but also the public marina and a centralization of the County's nurseries. Mitchell Park director, Howard W. Gregg, told the *Milwaukee Journal*: "I don't know when we have had so many big projects getting started at once."⁷⁶ The importance of keeping the County's new zoo project on schedule was a crucial factor in the park commission's decision to build the unique structure in phases.⁷⁷

If built over four years as suggested to the County Board at budget time, the entire project's cost was estimated at more than \$3,300,000—about \$578,000 more than if it would have all been contracted for and built without interruption.⁷⁸ Some opposed this stage-by-stage way of constructing each project, arguing that while the method might have been a “boon to Milwaukee’s construction and mechanical contractors,” it was a “detriment to the taxpayer’s pocketbook.”⁷⁹ Another letter accused the County Supervisors of being “poorly informed on the economies of delay and on the great public interest in exotic plants.” Explaining that high sales of house plants in the city is evidence

⁷⁵ Avery Wittenberger, “‘Full Speed’ Ordered on ‘58 Parks Projects,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Nov. 29, 1958.

⁷⁶ “County to Push Forward Its Recreation Projects,” *Milwaukee Journal*, May 24, 1956.

⁷⁷ Ray Kenney, “Conservatory Waits on Nature,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Sept. 13, 1962.

⁷⁸ “Conservatory Start is OK’d,” *Milwaukee Journal*, Nov. 23, 1958.

⁷⁹ “letter to the editor,” *Milwaukee Journal*, Dec. 10, 1964.

that a strong desire for a conservatory existed, the author argued that "Milwaukee's culture will never really flourish until it has its roots in the soil again."⁸⁰

Near the end of 1960, a circuit court suit aimed at the County Parks Commission caused a halt to the initial stages of construction. The dispute began the previous summer over whether the plans and specifications for the glass domes freeze out other bids unless they pay a prohibitive fee to the firm which designed them. Both Donald L. Grieb, the architect who designed the unique "bubble type" buildings, and representatives of Super Sky Products Co., which submitted the only bid to general contractors on the glasswork, denied that it was designed so "no other firm could make the installation."⁸¹ The commission sidestepped this lawsuit by removing glass installation from the second phase plan.

Despite these protests, progress on the Domes continued uninterrupted through 1960. By the end of July, most plants, around 90%, had been removed from the old greenhouses in Mitchell Park to a new plant nursery center in Wauwatosa.⁸² At this point, construction had already begun on the second dome, and a massive amount of dirt had been moved from Mitchell Park to provide fill for the 50 miles of expressway under construction throughout the city.⁸³ The project proceeded untroubled for another three years as the civil suit worked its way through the courts.

⁸⁰ "letter to the editor," *Milwaukee Journal*, Oct. 19, 1958.

⁸¹ "Park Board Sued Over Domes," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Oct. 22, 1960.

⁸² "Park Plants Are Moved," *Milwaukee Journal*, July 19, 1960.

⁸³ "Expressway Drama Will Halt for Winter," *Milwaukee Journal*, Dec. 8, 1960.

However, the earlier lawsuit would resurface at the beginning of 1963, in the form of an eight-page resolution released by several Democratic state legislators that called for an investigation into the alleged corruption. The resolution charged the architect, Donald L. Grieb—hired by the County to do the entire job of planning and designing the conservatory—illegally restrained and interfered with fair, competitive bidding.⁸⁴ Donald Grieb denied the charge, saying, “I must deny that what is being said is true. I’m certain that if there were any truth to the allegation, the Milwaukee County Parks Commission would know about it and have taken action about the matter.” and that “right now the matter, it seems, is being used as a political football.” The County board legislative committee further denied the allegation, describing the accusations as “an abuse of the legislative process” and “a political maneuver.”⁸⁵ In July of the following year, 1964, a circuit judge stated that there was “no fraud, no conceit, no mistake” before dismissing the suit altogether.⁸⁶

Wisconsin’s largest city has always had an antagonistic relationship with the state legislature, where anti-Milwaukee sentiments frequently lead to hostile legislation. In the United States, the fragmented federal system gives cities little power, much of which is delegated at the state level. The meddling of Wisconsin state lawmakers in the affairs of Milwaukee can be traced back to the 1910 election of the city’s first socialist mayor Emil Seidel. The city’s coalition of Republicans and Democrats, united in an effort to prevent any socialists from holding office, soon lobbied the state to pass a law designed to make

⁸⁴ “Legislators Say Bids on Park Job Rigged,” *Milwaukee Journal*, Feb. 21, 1963.

⁸⁵ “Park ‘Rig’ Charge Hit As ‘Abuse,’” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Apr. 9, 1963.

⁸⁶ “Supervisor’s Suit on Bids Thrown Out,” *Milwaukee Journal*, July 24, 1964.

the election of the Social Democrats more difficult. Still in effect today, the law prevents candidates in Milwaukee from being identified on the ballot by party, making casting votes on party lines harder.⁸⁷ In 1955, Milwaukee's increasingly powerful suburbs "found a receptive audience in the state legislature," whose Oak Creek decision allowed towns with more cows than people to bypass certain requirements to incorporate, closing the suburban iron ring around the city even tighter.⁸⁸ The state's history of passing anti-Milwaukee legislation continues to this day, with a 2013 law passed that removed the mandatory residency requirement for city employees.⁸⁹

The Conservative Revival: City-Suburb Conflicts

By the time the 1958 budget was sent to the County supervisors for approval, it had become one of the most significant and controversial bills assembled to finance the County government. At the same time, efforts were being made by the supervisors to lower the County's tax rate, something that would require shifting some capital improvement projects, including the recently approved Domes project that had been scheduled in the tax levy to bond financing. In addition, as the *Milwaukee Journal* lamented, to go into a much larger bonded debt program would "violate the theory" of some County officials.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Tula A. Connell. *Conservative Counterrevolution: Challenging Liberalism in 1950s Milwaukee*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, (2016), 26.

⁸⁸ Connell, 112.

⁸⁹ Jablonsky, *Devil in the Details*, 1303.

⁹⁰ "County's '59 Budget Woes Grow," *Milwaukee Journal*, Oct. 19, 1958.

The most controversy came from reductions in the Park Commission's budget. Considerable pressure was put on supervisors to restore 1.8 million for the new Mitchell Park Conservatory. Mayor Zeidler vetoed a resolution passed by the Common Council urging the County Board to keep its 1959 tax rate at the same level as 1958. Zeidler stated that he was "particularly interested in keeping funds to acquire park lands and to proceed with the Mitchell Park Conservatory in the County budget." Local media coverage noted that the reductions were "expected to produce turmoil" at the next board and committee meetings.⁹¹

Part of the pressure came from the suburban Mayor of Franklin, Robert G. MacDonald, who "feared that high state taxes (including high state income taxes) were keeping industry from moving to Wisconsin." William Bowman, City attorney for Franklin and Greenfield, accused Milwaukee of "trying to force the suburbs into a metropolitan government by working to push their taxes up." Both called for County budget cuts and an extensive study of the proposal to build a new Mitchell Park Conservatory.⁹² The Franklin incident would mark the start of a budgetary back-and-forth as the County Board's support for the project waxed and waned.

In February of 1963, miscellaneous finishing projects, an estimated \$400,000 worth, further increased the total cost of the conservatory from \$3,600,000 to over \$4,000,000.⁹³ News articles began to note the project's high cost, with \$4,064,000

⁹¹ "Mayor Rejects Council Plea On Tax Level," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Oct. 4, 1958.

⁹² "Suburbs Eye County Costs," *Milwaukee Journal*, Sept. 21, 1958.

⁹³ Paul M McMahon. "A Vagabond's Bench: Can Milwaukee Build a Tourist Industry?" *Milwaukee Journal*, June 17, 1962.

invested in the structures at this point, a value equivalent to nearly \$35 million today.⁹⁴ By the time the project was completed in 1967, it was millions over budget and six years behind schedule. Two stages had stretched to seven. Nevertheless, with the first of three Domes finally opening in December of that year, the Mitchell Park horticultural conservatory was celebrated as the County Parks system's "advance Christmas gift to the city and state."⁹⁵ Over 1,100,000 people visited the conservatory during 1965 when the first full cycle of flower shows was held.⁹⁶ By 1967 that figure would increase to over 2,500,000 annual visitors.⁹⁷

However, the budget fight over the Domes had just begun, escalating as the County Board is asked to begin charging admission to the new zoo and conservatory. The supervisor who proposed charging admission described the Domes as a "national tourist attraction" serving visitors from well outside the County.⁹⁸ One resident wrote about the admissions controversy about both the conservatory and the zoo being "not just a place of amusement but is basically cultural and educational, hence no more of a fit place to charge admission than a public library or museum." The letter goes on to argue that the conservatory deserves partial tax support, and to "require it to pay its whole way would be to "exploit it as a commercial enterprise."⁹⁹ Another argued that the idea of admission

⁹⁴ Avery Wittenberger, "Domed Flower House to Open," *Milwaukee Journal*, Dec. 6, 1964.

⁹⁵ "On Wisconsin; A New Jewel for Our Town; Conservatory Like No Other," *Milwaukee Journal*, Dec. 6, 1964.

⁹⁶ "Milwaukee Area Parks Offer Recreation for All," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Jan. 11, 1966.

⁹⁷ "Parks, Recreation and Culture Functions," *Milwaukee Journal*, Oct. 29, 1967.

⁹⁸ "The City," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Sept. 16, 1964.

⁹⁹ "Milwaukee: No Need to Change 1961 Verdict for a Free Zoo," *Milwaukee Journal*, Sept. 19, 1964.

charges at these public facilities runs so “counter to the Milwaukee tradition” that it should be rejected. The author goes on to highlight Milwaukee’s uniqueness among American cities due to its “unsurpassed public facilities—its parks, beaches, libraries, museum, gardens, new conservatory, and the zoo, which now ranks as one of the world’s best.” These facilities belong to all the “citizens of the community” who paid for them and patronized them. Furthermore, the conservatory was “built and maintained out of a dedication to public service which has made Milwaukee a great city.”¹⁰⁰

However, some County residents evidently agreed with the proposal, with one resident writing that “anything paid for is of greater value than that which is given away.” One extended letter to the *Milwaukee Journal* in support of admission fees called attention to the fact that people outside of the County who, therefore, do not pay taxes are also able to “enjoy the Domes for free.” The author goes on to complain about the use of the Domes by professional photographers and wedding planners that “stomp holes in the grass with their high heels,” and use the conservatory for their dressing rooms, and asks, “Is this what we are paying taxes for?”

The Evolving Role of the Botanical Garden

From the project’s inception, the design of Mitchell Park’s three separate domes focused on making sure that plants and flowers from “every part of the world” could be displayed in their native environments.¹⁰¹ A significant amount of attention then went to providing the proper temperature, humidity, and light that the plants required to grow.

¹⁰⁰ “No Fees, Please,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Sept. 3, 1965.

¹⁰¹ Oliver R. Witte, “New Conservatory Should Open in ’64,” *Milwaukee Journal*, Feb. 17, 1963.

This was a considerable task, as one dome contained a "rain forest" full of tropical plants and flowers that thrive in warm, humid areas, and another housed desert vegetation needing hot, dry air and a high amount of light. Building structures able to simulate such climates through Milwaukee's long and cold winters would be no easy task. Solving these problems required a number of technical innovations and the use of novel designs. For example, the Domes are arranged in the formation of an isosceles triangle, spaced in such a way to prevent anyone dome from shading another. Air currents from ventilators moved along the lower sides of the glass, from bottom to the top, able to check steaming and frosting while preventing the formation of heat pockets.

Development of the tropical house began some months before the show dome first opened to the public at the end of 1964. The tropical house, after its completion in 1966, held three times as many tropical plants and trees as had ever been shown in the old conservatory, which, by then, had been demolished for over a decade.¹⁰² Royal palms were planted inside the tropical dome, with park officials excitedly noting that the height of the plants would eventually reach the top of the 80-foot dome and need replacing.¹⁰³ The County touted the unique synthesis of modern materials and techniques that allowed them to control the temperatures and humidity in each dome, providing the conservatory with the tools to adapt each to their respective biomes.¹⁰⁴ One of the numerous positive articles covering the Domes praised the facility, as: "No one anywhere ever before has

¹⁰² Milwaukee—The New Conservatory Will Be Well Worth Waiting For," *Milwaukee Journal*, Aug. 9, 1961.

¹⁰³ "Conservatory Cost 'In Stages' Up 11%," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Aug. 7, 1958.

¹⁰⁴ "Mitchell Park to Offer Taste of Tropics," *Milwaukee Journal*, Jan. 16, 1966.

built a show place in which man can exercise so much control over the growing and display of flowers and plants of all climatic ranges.”¹⁰⁵

Viewed from a historical perspective, elite institutions like botanical gardens have always conveyed the power and reach of their respective nations. The history of modern botanical gardens begins at the height of the British Empire in the 18th and 19th centuries. Their purpose was intimately connected with colonialism, symbolizing the British monarchy's power and the empire's reach, whose use of capital, science, and technology gave them the ability to command plant life from tropical and arid regions to grow in England.¹⁰⁶ In the 19th century, the growth of these European gardens was propelled by new research on the medicinal content of plants and novel ways to exploit their economic potential.¹⁰⁷

The earliest North American gardens significantly differed from their English counterparts in several ways. Namely, the rhetoric surrounding botanical gardens in the United States put a greater emphasis on their ability to provide a refuge from the overcrowded industrial city for the less fortunate and their role in discovering and preserving plant diversity. Like the broader City Beautiful movement, these early botanical gardens reflect the motivation of the elite to "lift" the unwashed masses up by providing access to cultural institutions in an effort to preserve social stability.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ “Parks, Recreation and Culture Functions,” *Milwaukee Journal*, Oct. 29, 1967.

¹⁰⁶ Timothy W. Luke. “The Missouri Botanical Garden: Reworking Biopower as Florapower.” *Organization and environment* 13, no. 3 (2000), 307.

¹⁰⁷ Donald A Rakow and Sharon A Lee. “Western Botanical Gardens: History and Evolution.” In *Horticultural Reviews: Volume 43*, 269–310. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, Inc, (2015). 292.

¹⁰⁸ Rakow and Lee, 293.

Considered to be one of the first botanical gardens in the United States, the 1891 construction of the New York Botanical Garden (NYBG) was motivated by a desire of the city's ruling class to assert independence from the old world through enhancing the reputation of New York as an urban center of science and culture. In the 19th century, the creation of the botanical garden can be read as one of the earliest efforts to supplant London as the world's premier city during the rapid rise of New York.¹⁰⁹

The Missouri Botanical Garden was the first garden to be located away from the East Coast, situated outside St. Louis, a city on the frontier's edge. The institution was the project of Henry Shaw, born in 1800; the English immigrant made his fortune in the frontier town of St. Louis by selling provisions to "settlers, trappers, and fortune hunters heading west."¹¹⁰ When Shaw first founded his garden in 1859, botany was solely the domain of the industrial cities of the Northeast. Similar to the impetus behind the founding of the New York Botanical Garden, which sought to prove the American elite were just as cultured as Europeans, the founding of Shaw's Garden outside of St. Louis symbolized the opening of the West, with the frontier city casting off the yolk of the East Coast.

Much later, the Missouri Botanical Garden's 1959 construction of the Climatron marked the beginning of the modern era of conservatories. In 1960, two Milwaukee County Parks officials, general manager of parks Howard W. Gregg and County landscape architect Robert Mikula, inspected the Missouri botanical garden's newly

¹⁰⁹ Arthur William Hill. "The History and Functions of Botanic Gardens," *Annals of the Missouri Botanical Garden* Vol. 2, No. 1/2, *Anniversary Proceedings* (1915): 216-217.

¹¹⁰ Rakow and Lee, *Western Botanical Gardens*, 299.

constructed Climatron, a conservatory with a geodesic-dome that bore a striking resemblance to the ones under construction in Mitchell Park. The Climatron, a privately funded project, cost a little over \$1,000,000, while the Mitchell Park Domes, an entirely publicly funded endeavor, cost over \$3,600,000. Park officials praised the Climatron as "superior to the traditional design of plant display houses" but noted it would not be as "efficient" as Milwaukee's new conservatory. The shape and design of the Domes are further heralded as unique, with one article explaining away the similarity to St. Louis' Climatron conservatory, which also has a geodesic dome, as one of a "quite different design."¹¹¹

The Rise of Growth Politics

There was little doubt that the horticultural conservatory had attracted the nationwide attention Milwaukee's civic boosters had craved, and it was not long before the Domes were praised as an already firmly established "Milwaukee landmark and tourist attraction."¹¹² Local news coverage mentions the Domes alongside the County's new zoo, public museum, lakefront memorial center, Mitchell Field, County stadium, and the entire county parks and parkways system as new landmarks for a rising Milwaukee.

Soon after the construction of the Domes, a national convention of park executives and zoo directors chose Milwaukee as their host city, an event cited by local news articles as further evidence of a rising reputation. A County statement read: "Milwaukee should regard this group's choice of convention site as a mark of prestige,"

¹¹¹ Avery Wittenberger, "Plant House Is Inspected," *Milwaukee Journal*, Sept. 29, 1962.

¹¹² Avery Wittenberger, "There's Fun in the Parks," *Milwaukee Journal*, June 27, 1965; David E. Link. "Three Magnificent Bubbles," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Aug. 1, 1964.

as their coming here is “both a recognition that Milwaukee parks are outstanding in the country and an exceptional opportunity to get the story of our fine parks planning, facilities, and management spread across the country.”¹¹³

Further evidence that the Domes had elevated Milwaukee’s image occurred when “The Plymouth Traveler,” a magazine distributed throughout the nation, featured the midwestern city. The magazine emphasized the “progressive aspects of the city—including its “striking” new architecture, downtown renaissance, and the growing cultural climate—as well as its heritage of *gemuetlichkeit* and brewing.” The cover of the magazine features a design representing the three domes of the conservatory. “The legend of ‘Teutonic Milwaukee’ gets a bit out of hand at times, perhaps it tends to overshadow the real Milwaukee,” the introduction observes. “And what is the real Milwaukee? More than any other city in the United States it is a striking contrast between an established old order and a rapidly growing metropolis.”¹¹⁴

According to one Journal article, in light of the completion of the new capital projects, more needed be done to promote Milwaukee, as an alliance between business and local government could create a new industry, tourism, if they exploit these new attractions “aggressively and imaginatively.” The article concedes that Milwaukee “may never develop a nationwide appeal as a place to spend a week's vacation, like New York or Los Angeles or San Francisco or Chicago,” but it can increase its “popularity as a one or two or three-day stop-over.”¹¹⁵ Another letter to the editor describes the new Mitchell

¹¹³ “From Across Nation, They Come to See County Parks,” *Milwaukee Journal*, Sept. 19, 1965.

¹¹⁴ “Hometown Metropolis USA: That’s Milwaukee, Magazine Says,” *Milwaukee Journal*, Aug. 15, 1965.

¹¹⁵ Paul M McMahon. “A Vagabond’s Bench: Can Milwaukee Build a Tourist Industry?” *Milwaukee Journal*, June 17, 1962.

Park Conservatory as a “valuable asset to Milwaukee and all of Wisconsin, especially with the Braves [professional baseball team] leaving Wisconsin.” The author stated that the Domes, in concert with the new zoo, museum, and lakefront developments, surely will draw many tourists.¹¹⁶ A full-page ad pushed Milwaukee’s residents to fight to keep its major league baseball team by building a new stadium, with the advertisement praising Milwaukee for being a:

Big league community. In the last few years especially, the tempo of our development has been brisk. Tied together by a busy and growing expressway system are such splendid examples of community vitality as the zoo and the Mitchell Park Conservatory. Nor is the pace of Milwaukee's development about to slacken. A music hall is soon to be built, thanks to donations, large and small, approaching six million dollars. A downtown cultural entertainment center, unique in America, is on the verge of becoming more than a dream.¹¹⁷

Another point of pride for the city was the “totally local” nature of the project. The decision to build it came from Milwaukee county’s progressive park department who wanted an “outstanding showpiece.” Grieb also noted that the Mitchell Park Conservatory was an example of designing park structures to fit the land. Even structural materials—like stones from local beaches—were selected to tie in with nature.¹¹⁸ One article for the Milwaukee Sentinel noted that the County Parks system's progressive history, and the Domes being one of the “very few outstanding modern-day architectural works to be designed by a local architect,” make the conservatory an essential historical asset of the city. The Domes, alongside other capital improvements underway, were held

¹¹⁶ “letter to the editor,” *Milwaukee Journal*, Dec. 10, 1964.

¹¹⁷ “Let’s Prove It,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Jan. 27, 1965.

¹¹⁸ “Better Use of Park Space Urged,” *Milwaukee Journal*, Sept. 21, 1965.

up as evidence that Milwaukee was rapidly shedding its reputation for conservative planning.¹¹⁹

Concerns over the need to cultivate new industries like tourism, and attacks on Milwaukee for its conservative urban planning reputation, were nothing new. In a 1947 issue of the *Milwaukee Journal*, the Midwestern city is condescendingly referred to as "dear lady thrift," a shabby, old city with leaders who lacked the vision to see through civic projects capable of enhancing its status.¹²⁰ The city's planning reputation had long suffered from widespread criticism; no master plan had been drawn up for Milwaukee until 1947, long after Chicago and most other peer cities.¹²¹ Despite the recent growth of the city's cultural infrastructure and its construction of the Domes alongside other monumental projects, concerns continued to intensify throughout the 1960s.

Civic Pride and Expert Planning

In 1964, S. B. Zisman, an urban planner with experience working on downtown revitalization projects, called attention to Milwaukee's failure to exploit its size and use its "tradition of hospitality" to develop the city into a major tourist attraction. The city planner was invited to Milwaukee by a 15-man committee composed of business and civic leaders, exploring the feasibility of an entertainment and cultural center in downtown Milwaukee. Zisman explained that many people liked to come to Milwaukee because of its food and tradition. However, the city lacked a "focus of attention" and

¹¹⁹ David E. Link. "Three Magnificent Bubbles," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Aug. 1, 1964.

¹²⁰ Daniel Schaffer. As quoted in *Garden Cities for America: the Radburn Experience*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 154.

¹²¹ McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier*, 125.

failed to provide an adequate number of activities to keep people interested for more than a few days. A focus of attention for tourists should be established downtown, according to Zisman. He said he could only marvel at “what might have been” if the new Mitchell Park Conservatory had been nearer downtown, as “it would have added an element of excitement to the whole city.”¹²²

That same year, a sociology professor from Marquette University, Dr. Rudolph E. Morris, caused a stir in the local press when he argued that Milwaukee's cultural growth is being "stunted." Prof. Morris prefaced his comments by conceding that Milwaukee can point with "justifiable pride" to its Memorial Center, the Art Center, and the nearly completed Mitchell Park Conservatory as evidence that a "spirit of progress" existed in Milwaukee. However, he added that the city should not be content with year-to-year comparisons with itself. Instead, it should strive to keep pace with what “comparable cities” are doing. He pointed out that these comparisons do not make Milwaukee “look good,” using the cultural advances made in recent years by Cleveland, Minneapolis, St. Louis, and Kansas City as examples. These cities had developed “civic mindedness” that enabled them to have fine art galleries, symphony orchestras, and theatres. Milwaukee’s pace is “much too cautious and deliberate,” and its accomplishments are only a “fraction” of the achievements of other cities.¹²³ Morris referenced the city’s lack of a comprehensive master plan for cultural development, and the lack of sufficient support by “citizens who place cultural progress too far down the list of metropolitan priorities” as the primary reasons for this lack of growth. A lack of financial and intellectual

¹²² “Urban Planner Advocates Downtown Tourist Center,” *Milwaukee Journal*, Dec. 7, 1964.

¹²³ “Sociologist Claims Cultural Lag Here,” *Milwaukee Journal*, June 10, 1964.

curiosity and consistency in planning is also blamed. One article covering Morris' comments concluded by warning its readers that "complacency, like apathy, can be a deadly opponent."¹²⁴

Only a year later, Henning Soager, the managing director of Copenhagen's famed Tivoli Gardens, was hired as a consultant by the GMC in their quest to redevelop downtown. Soager was brought on to assist the feasibility committee in searching for a site for a potential "second downtown" in Milwaukee. In an interview with the *Milwaukee Journal*, Soager confessed that his first glimpse of Milwaukee had been "disappointing" as it "looked like just another American city," with "big houses and a freeway through the center of the city at the expense of the old houses." However, a tour of the Mitchell Park Conservatory, the zoo, and the Memorial Center, apparently changed his mind. Referencing Milwaukee, Soager said, "You have made positive approaches," he said, "I can see you are building for the future," before concluding that "Milwaukee today is an ugly duckling. However, I feel confident someday it will look like a beautiful swan on Lake Michigan."¹²⁵

The worries of civic elites and other boosters were not unjustified, and the coming decades radically changed Milwaukee's social, economic, and political landscape. That these changes were intensifying during the troubled seven-year construction of the Domes is no coincidence either. The new conservatory was built to act as a monumental, unique place that conveyed the city's progress and the bright future ahead of it. midcentury optimism was high, and belief in the power of the United States was at its

¹²⁴ "Culture's Growth," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 15, 1964.

¹²⁵ "Committee Favors Land on River for Park Similar to Copenhagen's," *Milwaukee Journal*, Jan. 21, 1965.

pinnacle. Americans had lifted themselves and the world out of the Great Depression, defeated Fascism in Europe and Asia, built a booming postwar economy, defeated polio, and would soon send men to the moon. A feeling that the United States would continue doing big things propelled LBJ's "Great Society" domestic policies and the War on Poverty.

Although the subtext of the Domes can be read in many ways, as an expression of the optimism of the postwar period, and a reflection of the American Century. The urgency behind their sudden construction is most revealing, which reflects a growing worry that all is not right in the industrial metropolis. An increasingly connected world had led to growing regional competition, as Milwaukee battled with nearby cities and suburbs over who would receive economic growth of the postwar period. The era would see the rise of growth politics, in the form of organized business interests, which increasingly came into conflict with the working-class politics of the city's old regime, all within the increasingly competitive battle to retain manufacturing jobs. Further trouble was foreshadowed by the fact that, by the postwar period, it had become increasingly clear that cities were losing jobs to their suburbs. In 1948, central cities had 66.9% of the manufacturing employment in their metro areas; by 1963, that share had decreased to 48.2%.¹²⁶ Compounding the problem, the ever-increasing class and racial polarization of city and suburb resulted in a traumatic financial squeeze in U.S. cities. The traditional ways of governing did not seem to be working, and many began looking for an alternative.

¹²⁶ John F. Kain, "The distribution and movement of jobs and industry," in James Q. Wilson, ed., *The Metropolitan Enigma* (New York, Doubleday, 1970): 1-43.

Chapter 3: Neoliberal Milwaukee

An Emblem of Civic Neglect

Today, the problems with the Mitchell Park Domes are legion, with cracks in the glass becoming increasingly visible over the last twenty years. In 2016, a falling chunk of concrete led to the closure of the Desert Dome, which was then followed by the closure of the remaining two domes for the better part of a year until thorough inspections could take place. News coverage of the dramatic event by the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, the city's only daily newspaper, lamented that "the Domes...have become an emblem of civic neglect" and are "in need of as much as \$75 million in repairs, a polite term for damage so systemic and penetrating that the word metastasized came to mind."¹

Referencing the current state of the Mitchell Park Domes and the Milwaukee Public Museum (MPM), a journalist for Milwaukee Magazine explains how "Their plight is a present-day crisis. Yet like many current crises, it reflects larger trends that developed over many years, accompanied by warnings to change course before it was too late."² The article's stark summary of the situation read: "The Domes are the legacy of mid-20th-century civic hubris, humbled by the harsh fiscal realities of early 21st-century politics."³

The considerable size and complexity of the Domes have led to numerous challenges for those charged with maintaining and repairing the aging structure over the last 50 years. Owing to its unique design, the individual components of the concrete and

¹ Mary Louise Schumacher, "The Singular Vision and Big Ambition of Domes Architect Donald Grieb," *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, Feb. 26, 2016.

² Ibid.

³ Sandler, *Preserving Themselves*, Milwaukee Magazine.

glass structures have become prohibitively expensive to repair. The method of transferring condensation through the structure, once touted as innovative, has caused moisture to build up and the concrete to crack. Compounding the problem, the effort required to reach the 85-foot-tall structure has made repairing and protecting the concrete doubly tricky. The high cost of repairs has led the County to continuously defer maintenance, which is, in the long-term, causing the structural system to fail. Like the Victorian greenhouse they once replaced, the Domes exist as a relic from another Milwaukee, with a structure beginning to "bow to the ravages of time and age." Do the Domes have a place in the Milwaukee of today? Would it be better to start over and build something entirely new? Is it moral for a County primarily known for its racial inequality to embark on such a project at all?

In attempting to answer these questions, the rest of this chapter examines the debate over the Domes by situating it within a larger discourse and set of urban changes that emerged in the late 20th century. Mitchell Park's recent past, present, and future exist at the intersection of race, the role of the state under Neoliberalism, memory and historic preservation, and the way power operates in the fragmented metropolitan area of contemporary Milwaukee. The following section traces the national socioeconomic trends most relevant to the changes impacting the Domes, an analysis that is even more relevant in today's globalized, interconnected world.

The Rise of Neoliberalism

Although unique in many ways, the story of urban decay in Milwaukee also reflects more significant trends felt throughout the United States in the late 20th century. Contextualizing the Domes, and the wider city of Milwaukee, within the nation's shifting

socioeconomic landscape provides crucial insight into the changing structure of urban power and the perspectives behind the policy decisions pushed by the city's civic elite. The optimism of the postwar years—the War on Poverty, the booming economy—was not going to last forever, and the new economic, social, and political projects, often subsumed under the term 'Neoliberalism,' would rise in its place.

In the aftermath of World War II, a considerable restructuring of state forms and international relations occurred. As the United States rebuilt much of Europe and Asia, it sought to, in the words of David Harvey, “prevent a return to the catastrophic conditions that had so threatened the capitalist order in the great slump of the 1930s.”⁴ The new states that arose in the aftermath, primarily liberal democracies in the West, shared some fundamental assumptions. If the world was going to prevent the resurgence of fascism and halt the advance of communism, the state must focus on achieving full employment and maintaining economic growth while looking after the welfare of its citizens. A variety of Keynesian economic interventions were often employed to blunt the negative impacts of business cycles and ensure reasonable full employment. In the United States, the share of national income taken by the wealthiest 1% decreased from 16% before the Second World War to around half that, at 8%, by the time the war had ended.⁵ The liberal regimes of the postwar period sought a “class compromise” between capital and labor, something felt to be vital in preventing another global conflict.

⁴ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2007), 9.

⁵ Harvey, 15.

However, as the 1960s ended, Keynesian economics had begun to break down as capital quickly accumulated and inflation rose in tandem, a scenario that should not have been possible according to Keynesian economics.⁶ The recession of 1973-1975, the worst since before the Second World War, is frequently the point used to mark the end of the postwar period and the start of a complete transformation of the national economy. The recession, and the “stagflation” it engendered, impacted everyone with rising inflation alongside an increasing unemployment rate. The manufacturing industry in the United States began hemorrhaging money, as an OPEC-induced oil shortage sent oil prices skyrocketing, which disproportionately impacted an industrial sector still reeling from the sudden rise in global competition.⁷ The crisis led to numerous plant closures, and those manufacturing firms that survived, often part of multinational corporations, relocated their labor-intensive operations to western and southern cities with fewer union protections or abroad to low-wage countries.⁸ A rapid decline in industrial employment began, with unemployment rising to a new postwar peak of 8.2%, and wages begin a long downward trend.⁹

After Reagan took office in 1980, he quickly moved to curb the power of labor, deregulate industry/agriculture/resource extraction, and "liberate the powers of finance both internally and on the world stage."¹⁰ The Reagan administration pushed for

⁶ Harvey, 12.

⁷ Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone. *The Great U-turn: Corporate Restructuring and the Polarizing of America*. (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 8.

⁸ Harrison and Bluestone. *The Great U-turn*, 22.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

extensive deregulation of various industries, from airlines and telecommunication to finance, opening complete market freedom to the corporations.¹¹ In addition, significant federal tax breaks for corporations acted as a form of public subsidy to aid the movement of capital from the unionized Northeast and Midwest into the non-union, weakly regulated, and low-wage West and South.¹² Their implementation marked a complete turn away from the Keynesian economics that had been dominant since the New Deal and towards the political economy of Neoliberalism.

As a theory of political and economic practices, Neoliberalism posits that the best way to advance human well-being is to "liberate individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade."¹³ Reagan's implementation of Paul Volcker's monetarist fiscal policies triggered considerable changes in fiscal policies globally. Once appointed as the chairman of the Federal Reserve, Volcker prioritized fighting rising inflation by restricting the amount of money in circulation. The new policies resulted in a significant rise in interest rates globally. The 'Volcker shock' would last from 1979-1982, and although he succeeded in lower inflation, it came at the expense of an increase in unemployment.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid., 2.

¹² Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, 26.

¹³ Harvey, 2.

¹⁴ Stephen Maher. "The Capitalist State, Corporate Political Mobilization, and the Origins of Neoliberalism." *Critical Sociology* 43, no. 4-5 (2017), 787.

The rising economic and political conflicts between capital and labor, with both sides attempting to retain their portions of the national income, resulted in high inflation that further threatened corporate profits.¹⁵ The embrace of the monetarist policies of Volcker, and the wide range of neoliberal policies implemented throughout the Reagan era, was one aspect of a larger project involving a restoration or reconstruction of class power.¹⁶ The success of the restoration can be seen in the constant growth of income inequality and the exponential growth of the income, and the growing political and economic importance, of CEOs.¹⁷

The Racial Dimension

The Great Migration, a movement of six million African Americans from the rural South to the old industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest between 1916 and 1970, precipitated a “massive internal rearrangement of populations” in U.S. cities.¹⁸ As Black families moved in, the predominantly white middle-class families were already in the process of moving to the suburbs. The metropolis became increasingly polarized as the white middle-class “established a firm and defensive posture in the suburbs,” resulting in a minority and working-class population that was increasingly trapped in the inner city.¹⁹

¹⁵ Harrison and Bluestone, *The Great U-turn*, 11.

¹⁶ Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, 19-24.

¹⁷ Harvey, 33.

¹⁸ Beauregard, *Voices of Decline*, 115.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

In the postwar United States, cities faced an outflow of the middle class that caused lower property assessments, lower tax revenues, increased crime, poorer health, an increased rate of social and economic dependency, more family instability, and larger government expenditures.²⁰ In his book *Voices of Decline*, Robert Beauregard notes that any lasting solutions would require an end of the American ghettos or eroding the foundations of the racist practices that perpetuate them.²¹ Often, the implicit meaning of various debates on social welfare, fiscal conditions, housing, education, and taxes, is race. Race soon became one of the most potent symbols in American politics, with Republicans first employing it to great effect in the 1980s.²²

The Entrepreneurial City

The end of the 1973-1975 fiscal crisis would not lead to a renewed period of growth in the older industrial cities of the Snowbelt, as the shrinkage of the manufacturing sector had critically wounded their core economies. The decentralization of industry, alongside the increasing suburbanization rates, paralleled a more considerable migration out of the Northeast and Midwest and into the southern and western parts of the United States, in a process referred to as the 'regional shift.'²³ The origin of the shift can be traced back to the early 1970s as both the Northeast and Midwest began to experience net population loss. Although the white population in these cities had been declining since the 1940s, the loss had been mitigated by an influx of

²⁰ Beauregard, 124.

²¹ Beauregard, 210.

²² Beauregard, 262.

²³ Beauregard, 235.

Black migrants from the South. However, from 1970-1974, white and Black people started leaving the Midwest and Northeast in high enough numbers to cause a net population loss, which would have been unthinkable only fifty years prior.²⁴

Older industrial cities like Detroit, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Milwaukee were increasingly left behind by the growing sunbelt and still faced future urban decline in their already weakened states. The growth of the service sector provided little relief.²⁵ The flow of investment for public and private projects in cities slowed as the risk of bankruptcy increased for cities throughout the rustbelt. Cities like Milwaukee, Detroit, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Newark, and Boston confronted their deficits and unfavorable bond ratings by cutting city services while implementing tax hikes, and in the process, decreasing their desirability as places to live or do business. Additionally, the austerity measures further incentivized moving to the suburbs for those with the means to make the move.²⁶

As a result, by the end of the 1980s, cities were no longer "producers of and marketplaces for goods; now the cities were taking on a control function and increasingly becoming the locus for advanced services."²⁷ These 'advanced services' involved finance, insurance, corporate management, law, communications, and information processing, within the increasingly global city. As the recession ended, the financial and service

²⁴ George Sternlieb and James W. Hughes, "Post-industrial America: decline of the metropolis," *Nation's Cities*, 13 (September 1975), 17.

²⁵ Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, 87.

²⁶ See footnote 22.

²⁷ Beauregard, *Voices of Decline*, 230.

sectors quickly recovered and began to expand rapidly. However, the manufacturing industry in the United States had been severely wounded and would never fully recover.

The recession pushed many cities into a fiscal crisis, with the older industrial ones in the Midwest and Northeast hit particularly hard.²⁸ As cities were anchored primarily to property taxes, their revenue bases began to shrink as the large manufacturing industries left, and as the white flight, which had already been a problem, rapidly changed from a trickle into a flood. While high unemployment added to the already overburdened public services, inflation made services more costly, causing unions to demand higher wages.²⁹ One study, released by the Urban Institute in 1975, found that more than half of cities with populations over 500,000 had insufficient or severely strained financial resources.³⁰

Large cities were finding themselves in an increasingly dire situation. As the outmigration of middle-class whites from the central city continued, Black families were left behind, many unable to leave and facing discrimination and diminishing opportunities. Up to this point, an expansion to the public sector and increased funding for social services, made possible by extensive federal aid, was seen as the solution to the urban crisis.³¹ So, as cities teetered on the edge of bankruptcy, they looked to the federal

²⁸ Beauregard, 224-225.

²⁹ Beauregard, 228-229.

³⁰ "Fiscal woes multiply for large central cities," *Search*, 5 (Winter, 1975): 3-9.

³¹ Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, 45.

government for help. However, Richard Nixon would declare the urban crisis over and subsequently lowered federal aid to cities already facing a financial squeeze.³²

Cities began branding themselves in response to the fiscal crisis, often including a catchy tagline and a sleek logo developed by professional firms. The development of a brand, a complex symbol representing various ideas and attributes, became a central concern for the new “entrepreneurial” city.³³ No longer thought of as places on their way out, the city was now a commodity to be marketed.³⁴ In her 1995 article *Making Milwaukee Famous*, Judith Kenny highlights Milwaukee’s recent campaigns to rebrand its image from working-class to world-class as exemplifying how today’s “entrepreneurial” city is governed. The city uses culture, both spontaneous and “authentic,” cultivated and “inauthentic,” to turn place into a “marketable commodity capable of generating wealth and power.”³⁵

The Urban ‘Revival’ of the 1980s

In the 1980s, the long decline of the old industrial cities, a continuous trend throughout the postwar period, began to slow, and in some ways, partially reverse. Although its origins can be traced to the late 1970s, the “back-to-the-city” movement would accelerate throughout the coming decade, as new office towers, retail malls,

³² Beauregard, *Voices of Decline*, 221.

³³ Burleigh B Gardner, and Sidney J Levy. “The Product and the Brand.” *Harvard business review* 33, no. 2 (1955): 33–39.

³⁴ Jeffrey Zimmerman, “From Brew Town to Cool Town: Neoliberalism and the Creative City Development Strategy in Milwaukee.” *Cities* 25, no. 4 (2008), 249.

³⁵ Judith Kenny, “Making Milwaukee famous: Cultural capital, urban image, and the politics of place.” *Urban Geography*, 16(5), (1995): 440-458.

waterfront apartments, and marinas suddenly popped up, transforming unsavory downtowns everywhere.³⁶ City governments and civic elites were quick to realize the potential benefits of changing the definition of a city from a manufacturing hub to a place where one can “consume and be entertained.”³⁷ New developments, often subsidized with public funds, used distinctive architecture, unusual environments, and were often located along waterfronts and historic districts built with middle-class residents and tourists in mind. In many cities, those moving back made up a new urban elite who worked for high-wage corporations and business service firms as financial consultants, insurance executives, stockbrokers, lawyers, and upper or middle management positions.³⁸

At the same time, the 1980s and 1990s would also see a large influx of immigrants from Latin America and Asia. This newfound diversity, and the increasingly global nature of many cities, were factors making a move back into the city desirable for many middle-class people. A 1990 *Newsweek* article reported that “more immigrants now come to the United States than ever before. About 10 million poured out of the 80s, more even than the 8.8 million who arrived between 1900 and 1910.”³⁹

A growth in downtown-centered jobs, the return of the middle class, the gentrification of inner-city neighborhoods, a renewed interest in city living, and the emergence of new immigrant communities all fed the “expanding euphoria of

³⁶ Derek Hyra, “The Back-to-the-City Movement.” *Urban Studies* (Edinburgh, Scotland) 52, no. 10 (2015): 1753–73.

³⁷ Beauregard, *Voices of Decline*, 249.

³⁸ Beauregard, 248.

³⁹ “America’s changing face,” *Newsweek*, 116 (Sept. 10, 1990), 240.

revitalization and boosterism."⁴⁰ The reinvestment of capital in Central Business Districts (CBD), a result of globalization and capital accumulation being increasingly directed towards boosting real estate values, was hailed as proof that deindustrialized cities' core could be revived.

The “New” Milwaukee

Mirroring the national trend, in 1980s Milwaukee, upper and middle-income households began moving back into its downtown and surrounding neighborhoods despite the continued downward trend in both population and jobs throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.⁴¹ Civic leaders, responding to the impact of deindustrialization, attempted to market Milwaukee as a 'world-class' city. With the election of John Norquist as Milwaukee's mayor in 1988, the city embarked on a complete reworking of its tax codes and zoning ordinances to create “optimal conditions” for businesses and ensure a high quality of life for upper and middle-class persons returning to the central city.⁴²

As articulated by former Mayor Norquist in his book *The Wealth of Cities*, New Urbanism emphasizes 'individual responsibility over government subsidies.' To Norquist, the private sector offered the best solutions to a wide range of urban problems that had

⁴⁰ Beauregard, *Voices of Decline*, 241.

⁴¹ University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Center for Economic Development, *The economic state of Milwaukee: the city and region* (Update, fall 2001), based on HUD State of the Cities Data System.

⁴² Judith Kenny and Jeffrey Zimmerman, “Constructing the 'Genuine American City': Neo-Traditionalism, New Urbanism and Neo-Liberalism in the Remaking of Downtown Milwaukee.” In *Cultural Geographies* 11, no. 1 (2004), 77.

long been the purview of the public sector, such as affordable housing and education.⁴³ Therefore, cities should only be responsible for reducing both crime and taxes to create the optimal business environment.⁴⁴ In his book on New Urbanism in Milwaukee, Joseph Rodriguez argues that self-help attitudes like these characterize the city's development over the last half-century. He terms this style of planning "bootstrap urbanism," as it calls for Milwaukee to 'pull itself up by its bootstraps.'⁴⁵

One factor making the public-private partnership an attractive form of urban renewal in the entrepreneurial city was that it did not call for the significant government expenditures and wealth redistribution that past solutions to economic inequality (e.g., the War on Poverty) had deemed necessary.⁴⁶ During the 1970s, many hoped that President Carter would reverse the previous two administration's policies of national ambivalence towards cities and resume federal aid; little would change. The Carter Administration's Secretary to the Department of Housing, Patricia Harris, bluntly said, "The most essential ingredients to urban progress are local and state leadership in concert with private sector resources."⁴⁷ The federal government's hands-off approach would intensify under Reagan, whose administration ended general revenue sharing with cities. Furthermore,

⁴³ Kenny and Zimmerman, 78.

⁴⁴ John Norquist, *The Wealth of Cities: Revitalizing the Centers of American Life* (Reading, MA, Addison-Wesley, 1998).

⁴⁵ Joseph A. Rodriguez. *Bootstrap New Urbanism: Design, Race, and Redevelopment in Milwaukee*. Lanham, Maryland; Lexington Books, (2014), 10.

⁴⁶ Harrison and Bluestone, *The Great U-turn*, 4.

⁴⁷ Marvin Stone, "Who can save our cities? *U.S. News and World Report*, 84, (Mar. 6, 1978), 88.

many were skeptical of federal urban policy, pointing to the ways federal highway construction and mortgage lending had just exacerbated sprawl in the past.

However, as pro-growth voices became amplified, others simmered below the surface or were drowned out by the narrative of rejuvenation.⁴⁸ The national questions on race that had exploded to the surface in the revolts of the mid to late 1960s had never been resolved, and it quickly became apparent that any new growth had been matched by a deepening of poverty and a widening of inequalities. The people who made an “urban revival” possible, a growing low-wage working-class employed in the service sector, and an increasingly visible population of homeless people, were marginalized from its benefits.⁴⁹ Those returning to the city, attracted by its diversity, would often displace those very same communities.

Despite the urban revival of the 1980s, aggregate statistics hardly registered any interruption to the downward trend of the old industrial cities. Over 60% of industrial jobs were in the central city in the 1960s, today that figure stands at less than 19%.⁵⁰ The economic center of gravity has shifted from the central city to the counties that make up Milwaukee’s exurban ring. Furthermore, the much larger growth rate of service sector jobs in the suburbs compared to central cities led to a widening gap in metropolitan areas between where jobs were located and where they were most needed.⁵¹ In Detroit, a

⁴⁸ Kenny and Zimmerman, *Remaking Downtown Milwaukee*, 92.

⁴⁹ Beauregard, *Voices of Decline*, 246.

⁵⁰ Marc Levine, *Perspectives on the Current State of the Milwaukee Economy*. (UWM Digital Commons, 2013), 8.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

director of job creation noted that "the largest number of jobs is being created in the suburbs, where unemployment is the lowest. In the city, where unemployment is the greatest, we find the least number of jobs being created."⁵²

Without the upward mobility manufacturing jobs once provided, the working and underclasses within the city found jobs in the service sector. These new jobs saw the urban poor serving the middle class and wealthy for increasingly low wages, poor housing, inadequate healthcare, and education in underfunded public schools that provided little opportunities for upward mobility. Despite effectively subsidizing the urban revival, the poor and working-class are pushed away, unable to receive its benefits. While the "downtown revival" spurred growth, each new round of reinvestment hurt the city's poor, adding to their already heavy burdens.⁵³ A "dual-city," one rich, the other poor, was beginning to emerge.

Institutional Decay

A Park System on Life Support

Although the many cultural institutions run by Milwaukee County are now a heavy burden, this was not always the case. As discussed in earlier chapters, the County had grand ambitions during Milwaukee's booming postwar years. These ambitions could be seen in the County's decision to build and operate an extensive cultural infrastructure, taking on far greater responsibilities than traditionally expected. Supervisor Jason Haas, chairman of the County Board's parks committee, says the Domes fell victim to "years of

⁵² Carey W. English, et al., "Suburbs have jobs, cities have jobless," *U.S. News and World Report*, 99 (Nov. 18, 1985), 84.

⁵³ Beauregard, *Voices of Decline*, 224.

willful neglect,” but adds, “Virtually every building in all the County’s holdings suffers from deferred maintenance.”⁵⁴

Milwaukee County, facing a rapidly growing imbalance between the cost of providing services and its ability to generate revenue, is approaching a crisis point. The Wisconsin State Legislature, continuing its legacy of harboring anti-Milwaukee sentiment, has implemented a shared-revenue formula that disproportionately impacts the state’s largest city. Although Milwaukee County’s economy has recovered and even started to grow in the years since 2008’s Great Recession, leading to increased tax revenue, the revenue received by the County has stayed flat with the difference sent to the state.⁵⁵

Insufficient state-aid, compounded by the impact of a controversial pension deal in 2001, led to extensive cutbacks in the County budget. To hold down property taxes while keeping admission charges affordable, County Supervisors delayed any major capital projects and implemented short-term, cost-cutting fixes. Delay after delay led to the buildup of an increasingly insurmountable backlog of repairs throughout County facilities. In 2009, County auditors determined that deferred maintenance costs amounted to \$200 million. In 2016, the estimated cost had risen even further to an estimated \$246 million, with the Mitchell Park Domes alone accounting for \$30 million of that figure.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Larry Sandler, “The Milwaukee Public Museum and Mitchell Park Domes Face a Crisis: Preserving Themselves,” *Milwaukee Magazine*, Apr. 28, 2020.

⁵⁵ “Sheldon Wasserman,” *3rd District Newsletter*, (Winter 2020), <https://County.milwaukee.gov/files/County/board-of-supervisors/District-3/District-3-Newsletter/NewsletterSW2020w.pdf>

⁵⁶ Sandler, *Domes Face a Crisis*,

The Wisconsin Policy Forum's 2018 audit of Milwaukee County's finances explains the problem in its introduction:

In attempting to responsibly address one of the County's foremost capital challenges (bus replacement) as well as highway repairs and needed I.T. upgrades, the budget has little capacity to address other pressing needs, most notably in its parks and buildings. There is little question that infrastructure now looms as the County's foremost financial challenge, exceeding even that posed by growing pension and retiree health care costs.⁵⁷

In no functional area of County government is this problem better exemplified than in the Parks. In 1980, over 1300 full-time Parks employees maintained the County's extensive system of 158 parks (encompassing 15,325 acres). Today, despite providing those same services, there are only 240 full-time Parks employees. The Parks Department is increasingly reliant on earned revenue; once 20% of the budget, today accounting for 60%. No other parks system of a similar size has such a significant dependence on earned revenue to maintain services. Despite an infrastructure repair backlog estimated at more than \$200 million – with 35 capital requests totaling \$14.9 million for 2018 – the Parks received \$3.6 million for five projects in the recommended annual budget. Of that amount, \$2.1 million was for a single project at McKinley Marina, leaving little money to meet the growing infrastructure backlog.⁵⁸ So it came as no surprise that, with concrete crumbling from above, the Domes were closed in February 2016 to protect visitors.⁵⁹

The Problem of the Domes

⁵⁷ Rob Henken, "Milwaukee County 2018 Executive Budget," October 2017. p. 11, Accessed at <https://wispolicyforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/2018CountyBudgetBrief.pdf>

⁵⁸ Milwaukee County Department of Audit, *A Tale of Two Systems*, December 2009. p. 23, Accessed at <http://County.milwaukee.gov/ImageLibrary/Groups/cntyAudit/report0916.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Virginia Small, "Op-Ed: The Demoting of the Domes," *Urban Milwaukee*, Nov. 26, 2016, <https://urbanmilwaukee.com/2016/11/26/op-ed-the-demoting-of-the-domes/>.

Following their closure in 2016, the County formed the Domes Task Force to assess the state of the conservatory today and, if it was even possible, what could be done to save the iconic mid-century structures. The County then commissioned a study to assess the structure, and the highly publicized findings called for their complete demolition.⁶⁰ Despite the Dome's consistently low attendance and fiscal difficulties, the widely publicized feasibility study received significant pushback from the wider community, as the thought of such an iconic part of the Milwaukee skyline being demolished had struck a nerve. Responding to the report, the vice president at the National Trust for Historic Preservation noted that the "[d]emolition of the Mitchell Park Domes, an iconic symbol of Milwaukee and a National Treasure, would result in an irreparable loss for the community... The public has overwhelmingly voiced their support for protecting these local landmarks from disinvestment, destruction, and demolition."⁶¹ The dramatic series of events triggered another study of the Domes' future, leading to a task force recommendation to "not only renovate the structures but to reimagine their relationship to their host park and the [surrounding] community."⁶² The report further warns that if the County's current policy of neglect continues and nothing is done, the costs of deferred maintenance will continue to climb as the deterioration continues.

⁶⁰ Gallagher Museum Services, *Milwaukee County MPM-Domes Co-Location: Feasibility Study*, Milwaukee County, Feb. 19, 2019.

⁶¹ Bobby Tanzilo, "Report: Demolish the Domes and Combine the Replacement with the Milwaukee Public Museum," *OnMilwaukee*, Mar. 12, 2019, <https://onmilwaukee.com/articles/mpm-domes-task-force-report>.

⁶² Larry Sandler, "The Milwaukee Public Museum and Mitchell Park Domes Face a Crisis: Preserving Themselves," *Milwaukee Magazine*, Apr. 28, 2020.

Over the past 50 years, the Domes have seen a steady decline in their annual attendance, from around 500,000 during the 1970s, down to 200,000 by 2000, and dropping even further to 180,000 in 2017.⁶³ In comparison, the Milwaukee Zoo has experienced consistent growth in its annual attendance, which stands at 1.3 million as of 2019, while the city's museums of natural history and art have annual attendance figures of 502,000 and 400,000, respectively.⁶⁴ Staffing issues are one likely culprit for the declining attendance. For a facility as large and complex as the Domes, the number of staff employed is abnormally low, reflecting the "very tight staffing" throughout the Milwaukee Parks system.⁶⁵ With just thirteen full-time employees, the Domes have one of the highest, if not the highest, attendee to employee ratio at 13,846 visitors per employee.⁶⁶ For reference, the Milwaukee Art Museum has a ratio of 2,492 attendees for each full-time employee.

The current Director of the Domes, Doris Mackey, while discussing the conservatory's desire to expand its research capabilities, echoed these worries:

But, without the staff you know which is the main resource that we need to move forward with that that's unfortunately sometimes what is holding us back from doing more. For instance, the tropical Dome used to be maintained by a team of horticulturalists. Right now, we only have one. In the summer months, the Dome needs to be watered twice a day and it is not automatic, it is manually watered. That can take approximately three hours to get done with the entire Dome and if you do it in the morning and you do it in the afternoon pretty much that's your entire day if you are the person in charge of that Dome. So, imagine

⁶³ ConsultEcon, Inc. and HGA, *Mitchell Park Horticultural Conservatory Future Path and Feasibility Study Phase 1 Report*, (Milwaukee County, July 13, 2018), III-2
<https://County.milwaukee.gov/files/County/parks-department/Planning-Dept-Documents/DomesFuturePathFeasibilityStudy-Phase1Report.pdf>

⁶⁴ Gallagher Museum Services, *Milwaukee County MPM-Domes Co-Location: Feasibility Study*, (Milwaukee County, Feb. 19, 2019), 15.

⁶⁵ Mitchell Park Domes Task Force et al., *The Mitchell Park Horticultural Conservatory: Future Path and Feasibility Study Phase 2 Report*, (Milwaukee County, July 27, 2018), III-5.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, IV-6.

how stretched they are because not only they have to water, but they also have to maintain and clean and prune and pod and repot and all the treatments that the plants require. So, yeah definitely, you know, not having enough staff is one of the challenges that doesn't allow us to get involved with other projects.⁶⁷

Additionally, the Task Force report notes that maintenance performed on the Domes has been "inadequate" over an extended period, compounding the conservatory's structural problems. The small number of staff employed by the County to operate the conservatory means there is little capacity to either expand programs or react to market opportunities. Furthermore, the lack of substantial marketing for the Domes ensures "minimal" attendance. A Historic Preservationist focus group sought out by the Task Force notes that "branding the newly improved Domes could assist in promotion."⁶⁸

Much like other contentious issues involving the modern American city, there is a—sometimes subtle, sometimes explicit—racial dimension that cuts through the debate over the future of the Domes. The reports ordered to assess the state of the park today note that a "perception of location public safety issues" has had a significantly negative impact on attendance.⁶⁹ The report goes on to note that the surrounding Clarke Square Neighborhood is "not a tourist-oriented location," with few supportive "commercial or attractions nearby."⁷⁰ Clarke Square, a neighborhood that is 68% Latinx compared to

⁶⁷ Doris Mackey [Director of Mitchell Park Horticultural Conservatory], in a conversation with the author, Apr. 2021.

⁶⁸ ConsultEcon, Inc. and HGA, *Feasibility Study Phase 1*, 16.

⁶⁹ Domes Task Force et al., IV-1.

⁷⁰ Domes Task Force et al., IV-2.

18% citywide, also has a poverty rate of 42%, much higher than Milwaukee's average of 29%.⁷¹

Comments at public meetings ranged from pointing to how underfunded city services are in the area, as one comment put it, “[n]ot doing anything in a neighborhood that is already neglected and underfunded is unacceptable. Giving this community another blighted property i.e. option 1 (“Do Nothing”) is truly upsetting,”⁷² to others simply stating that the “area is dangerous and I will no longer go there.”⁷³ The feeling that Milwaukee County should prioritize more essential sections of their budget, like their troubled transportation infrastructure, is frequently used to critique any plans to renovate the Domes. To some, in a County known for its inequality, it would be unjust to fund any large-scale capital improvements that will, at best, result in a gentrifying neighborhood that pushes current residents out.

As one email received by the Task Force noted:

The cost of maintaining the old structures for maybe 25 years seems absurd, especially given the poverty and inequality that exists on the near south side. Spending \$95 million on improvements to an archaic structure while MPS schools, homes, and businesses in the neighborhood have been deteriorating for years is a bit off-putting.⁷⁴

⁷¹ ArtsMarket, Inc., et al., *Re-envisioning Mitchell Park and its Domes for the Next 50 Years*, (Milwaukee County, Aug. 9, 2019), 50.

⁷² Mitchell Park Domes Task Force et al., *Phase 2 Final Report Appendix*, 68.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Mitchell Park Domes Task Force et al., 87.

With the increased rates of poverty and widening inequality on the Southside, the Domes exist in “severe isolation” from the surrounding Latinx community.⁷⁵ Local organizations within the Clarke Square Neighborhood pushed for the Domes to better reflect the surrounding Hispanic-majority area by incorporating elements of Latinx culture and lowering the high fees to host events that impede the use of the Domes for local celebrations.⁷⁶

Although most of the public comments collected by the Task Force support either renovating or repairing the structures, a sizable minority in favor of demolition does exist. Most of those who did support the Domes' demolition and wanted to share their thoughts decided to do so anonymously. The comments themselves often argue against possible tax raises and call attention to the numerous areas of the County government whose funding should take priority over the massive capital expenditure it would take to rehabilitate the Domes. Although there were many public comments in favor of demolition, some best exemplify the perspective. One wrote that “[m]aintaining the Domes is a waste of money. Let them fall into disuse and put off demolition for as long as possible,” another concurred, arguing that the “Domes need to go, including greenhouses and everything! Our taxes should be used in better, more purposeful ways to improve the County,” and finally, “[l]ike the Victorian greenhouse before it, the Domes have outlived their useful lives and have become a money pit. Best to tear them down.”⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Mitchell Park Domes Task Force et al., 9.

⁷⁷ Mitchell Park Domes Task Force et al., 87.

The Friends of the Domes: Write-in Campaign

A number of the comments recorded during the Task Force's meeting that asked for the public's input favor an unlisted "Option 7," where the Domes are demolished, and an entirely new conservatory is built in its place. Many pointed to the Milwaukee Art Museum's Calatrava addition as an example of a new landmark's ability to "stir new interest and increase attendance"; another noted how "[a] new conservatory with a modern design could provide very positive exposure for Milwaukee." Surprisingly, the write-in campaign was orchestrated by the Friends of the Domes organization.⁷⁸ Sally Sullivan, the Executive Director of the Friends of the Domes, sent an email encouraging supporters and volunteers to write in favor of demolishing the Domes and constructing a completely new facility in its place.

The disconnect between the Friends group and the Domes Task Force, which is primarily made up of historical preservation activists, hints at a deeper conflict. The disagreement echoes other public comments accusing the Task Force of being predisposed towards specific options, with one comment pointing to the use of obviously leading names for each option like "Only address deferred maintenance," and "Do Nothing." One comment explained the frustration motivating this write-in campaign.

The majority of the Task Force represents local/neighborhood interest OR architectural preservation. Thus, consideration of a relocated and new conservatory will automatically fail to win support, by default of the Task Force personal agendas... Yet another example of Milwaukee malaise and mediocrity.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Mitchell Park Domes Task Force et al., *Phase 2 Final Report Appendix*, 204-213.

⁷⁹ Mitchell Park Domes Task Force et al., *Phase 2 Final Report Appendix*, 68.

The governing structure of the Domes, which continues to be solely run by Milwaukee County despite most of its conservatory peers being run by nonprofits, alongside the physical and operational problems noted above, severely limit the attraction of private sector involvement. The feasibility reports point to the hesitancy of donors to back a public facility as they “fear the funds will be misused.” The Domes Task Force itself frequently argues that the “conservatory’s institutional governance must reflect its institutional needs” and that a nonprofit governance structure is needed to form successful public-private partnerships.⁸⁰ Many attending the public meetings evidently agreed, pointing to the need to change the organizational structure of the conservatory as anything run by the County ends up “inefficient,” and, moreover, it is the County that is “largely to blame for the current state of the Domes.” However, an email from Mary Eysenbach, the Director of Conservatories for Chicago’s Department of Cultural and Natural Resources, whose advice was solicited by the Task Force, warned that if the Friends of the Domes have done an inadequate job raising funds, then “they can’t raise money that you need for repairs and investments. Not without a wholesale change in board members. If the long-term goal is to have them run the place in the future, they would have to be able to demonstrate REAL capacity that, so far, they haven’t.”⁸¹

Writing for Milwaukee Magazine, Larry Sandler notes that the same was said about the Milwaukee Public Museum, once County-run, to justify its transition from a

⁸⁰ Ibid., VI-12.

⁸¹ Mitchell Park Domes Task Force et al., *THE MITCHELL PARK HORTICULTURAL CONSERVATORY*[emphasis original]: *Future Path and Feasibility Study Phase 2 Final Report Appendix*, Milwaukee County, July 27, 2018, 52, accessed July 3, 2021, <https://County.milwaukee.gov/files/County/parks-department/Planning-Dept-Documents/2018-07-27MDPhase2FINALReportAppendix.pdf>).

public to a nonprofit governance structure in 1992. Despite hopes that the move would increase the efficiency and profitability of the institution, the move would lead to the institution's worst fiscal crisis yet. The addition of an IMAX theatre in 1996 and a live butterfly exhibit in 2000 trapped the facility under an almost insurmountable amount of debt. To cover day-to-day costs and mask the dire nature of the situation from the board, the CFO, Terry Gaouette, emptied the Public Museum's endowment fund. A County audit and a 2005 Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel investigation exposed the truth, forcing Gaouette and others to resign.⁸²

Shifting Urban Management

Over the decades since its construction, the Mitchell Park Conservatory has gone from one of the County's "most popular attractions—one which will help entice tourists, horticultural experts, and flower lovers to Milwaukee and add to community pride," to an "emblem of civic neglect."⁸³ To understand the challenges the Domes face today, it is essential to step back and examine the spatial, cultural, and managerial changes that cities and their institutions have gone through over the more than fifty years that have passed since the conservatory's construction. As one of the dozen County employees responsible for running the Domes today put it: "Milwaukee, and the area surrounding the Domes, have gone through so much... we have weathered many storms here."⁸⁴

⁸² Dave Umhoefer, Steve Schultze, and Avrum D. Lank, "Museum Audit Leads to Criminal Inquiry," *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, Dec. 1, 2005.

⁸³ Avery Wittenberger, "Domed Flower House to Open," *Milwaukee Journal*, Dec. 6, 1964.

⁸⁴ Paula Zamiatowski [Conservatory Interpretive Educator], in a conversation with the author, Apr. 2021.

The Modern Conservatory

Today, facing increasing pressures to become more sustainable, conservatories occupy a precarious position. Despite championing their new roles as environmental stewards, in most gardens, intense consumption of water, chemicals, and energy is typical. Great quantities of water are consumed to irrigate these facilities, with cold-climate gardens being particularly energy-intensive due to the costs of heating decades-old glasshouses to tropical levels. Tensions within the institutions have grown as the role of gardens shifts, especially between sustainability-focused directors and horticulturists who resent the rationing of resources on the plants.⁸⁵ However, the most pressing problems faced by modern botanical gardens come from their reliance on attracting an audience for their operating revenue. Modern gardens are increasingly searching for resources and relevance. One U.K. study on the public's opinion of botanical gardens found that they were seen as "stoic places, reflecting the conservatism of the wealthy people whose money founded them."⁸⁶ Still, as traditional botany departments in universities disappear, the research produced by botanical gardens is more important than ever.⁸⁷

In the wake of budget shortfalls, the 2002 closure of the Sunken Gardens portion of Mitchell Park has left the facility with little space that leads to brief visits at 60 minutes or less. The lack of an outdoor garden is atypical for conservatories; with most

⁸⁵ Victoria Johnson. "Identity, Sustainability, and Local Setting at U.S. Botanical Gardens." *Organization and environment* 25, no. 3 (2012), 260.

⁸⁶ Fred Powledge. "The Evolving Role of Botanical Gardens." *BioScience* 61, no. 10 (2011): 743–749.

⁸⁷ Sara Oldfield. *Botanic Gardens: Modern-Day Arks*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2010.

acting as just one section of extensive outdoor botanical gardens; leaves the Domes with inadequate space to provide educational or research activities.⁸⁸ In an attempt to remedy the lack of activities, an enhancement to the show dome (least disruptive as it does not house a botanical collection) was a major option favored by the Task Force. One potential enhancement was the construction of an "adventure dome," with zip lines and a variety of other theme-park-centric activities that, when added, might draw people to the park. The Domes Taskforce praised the adventure dome proposal on the basis that it was "different from anything in Madison or Chicago." However, this option proved highly unpopular with residents of Milwaukee, attracting almost exclusively angry comments pleading with the County not to turn the Domes into the "Wisconsin Dells," a popular regional waterpark, and to keep the structures relatively undisturbed.

One public comment against the proposal argued that:

The appearance and function of domes must be preserved as they are. Absolutely NO zip-lines or similar "fun" activities! I would prefer no eaters – we have plenty of those around. Adding educational amenities would be nice, if not too costly. Not every facility in public use must be for profit! Let the zoo and Museum deal with animals, including butterflies."⁸⁹

Botanical gardens, alongside other cultural institutions, have gone through many dramatic changes over the decades, both internally and in "their perceived role in our economic and social life."⁹⁰ Museums, art galleries, zoos, and conservatories, have all had to react to technological innovations, shifting demographics, and crucially, changing

⁸⁸ Mitchell Park Domes Task Force et al., *THE MITCHELL PARK HORTICULTURAL CONSERVATORY* [emphasis original]: *Future Path and Feasibility Study Phase 2 Report*, Milwaukee County, July 27, 2018, I-3, VI-9. <https://County.milwaukee.gov/files/County/parks-department/Planning-Dept-Documents/2018-07-27MDPhase2FINALReportAppendix.pdf>.

⁸⁹ Mitchell Park Domes Task Force et al., *Phase 2 Final Report Appendix*, 67.

⁹⁰ Carl Grodach. "Museums as Urban Catalysts: The Role of Urban Design in Flagship Cultural Development." *Journal of urban design* 13, no. 2 (2008), 196.

economic conditions. Most cultural institutions struggle with how to best raise funds for capital improvements in a neoliberal world. These facilities have adapted to become more "experience" based to best capture their visitors' limited funds and leisure time and are increasingly competing with other commercial, educational, cultural, and nature-based institutions. Efforts to attract more visitors and increase revenue often include constructing larger signature buildings, cultivating corporate sponsorship, and providing more opportunities for consumption through events, cafes, stores, and merchandise.⁹¹ This rapid shift towards an entrepreneurial model mirrored a general trend in urban management that occurred throughout the 1980s as Neoliberalism spread throughout the western world.⁹²

Culture-led Development in 21st century Milwaukee

At the dawn of the 21st century, Milwaukee's civic elites would continue their attempts to reverse the past three decades of declining incomes and population losses. Municipal leaders found their solution in the "live/work/play" civic plan, a newly unified growth vision accompanied by the start of a significant downtown redevelopment effort. The city's downtown revitalization efforts began in earnest in the Spring of 1999, with the completion of Milwaukee's first comprehensive downtown masterplan.⁹³ The plan's tagline, 'live, work, learn, and play,' was characteristic of its rhetoric emphasizing the

⁹¹ Irina Van Aalst and Inez Boogaarts. "From museum to mass entertainment: the evolution of the role of museums in cities," *European Urban and Regional Studies* 9(3), (2002): 195-209.

⁹² David Harvey, "From managerialism to entrepreneurialism: the transformation of urban governance in late capitalism." *Geografiska Annaler* 71, (1989), 3.

⁹³ Kenny and Zimmerman, *Remaking Downtown Milwaukee*, 80.

concerns of civic entrepreneurialism. The launch of its new growth development strategy included a logo change meant to better represent the 'new' Milwaukee packaged alongside a marketing campaign "designed to dramatically shift perceptions of the city from industrial to cultural, from production to consumption, and from decline rustbelt to fast-forward sophistication."⁹⁴

A New Urban Elite: The Creative Class

Milwaukee's most recent revitalization and reindustrialization efforts have been going on for well over twenty years. To reverse the decades of decline and growing poverty rates, Milwaukee, along with other declining "Rust Belt" cities, looked to urban studies theorist and academic star Richard Florida, who in 2002 released his groundbreaking book on the importance of attracting the 'creative class.'

The "creative class" is Florida's term for highly-skilled, entrepreneurial, and college-educated professionals. Florida describes this new class's core as scientists, engineers, university professors, poets, novelists, entertainers, designers, and architects.⁹⁵ Although economic and labor scholars have long connected urban growth to the ability to attract this "creative class," Florida's theory differs by connecting this class to bohemian cultural values. Florida argues that the perceived open and tolerant culture enhances the creative classes' attraction to a particular location; these are "places that are open to

⁹⁴ Zimmerman, *From Brew Town to Cool Town*, 231.

⁹⁵ Richard L. Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: and How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2002.

immigrants, artists, gays, and racial integration.”⁹⁶ This, in concert with distinct recreational and nightlife ecologies, attracts this new class.

Milwaukee, openly citing Florida’s urban planning ideas when discussing its cultural policies, explained that its downtown redevelopment plan is a complete rework of the central city in an explicit attempt to appeal to the lifestyle needs of Florida’s “creative class.”⁹⁷ Florida suggests several policies for cities hoping to attract the creative class. According to Florida, the old industrial cities of the Snowbelt should move away from attempting to court new corporations or tweaking tax structures and instead should focus on providing the suitable material and cultural infrastructure needed for the creative class to thrive.⁹⁸

If You Build it, They Will Come

Catalytic Projects

In the late 1990s, a newly created alliance of downtown interest groups, Spirit of Milwaukee (SOM), would begin to make its presence felt in local politics. A key section of Milwaukee's downtown revitalization plan was devoted to the potential benefits of introducing a "catalytic project" to the city, providing the area with further market advantages.⁹⁹ SOM embarked on a campaign to fund the new landmark, a component of their larger “Greater Milwaukee branding strategy,” which financed efforts to promote an

⁹⁶ Zimmerman, *From Brew Town to Cool Town*, 232.

⁹⁷ Zimmerman, 233.

⁹⁸ Richard L. Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: and How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2002.

⁹⁹ Kenny and Zimmerman, *Remaking Downtown Milwaukee*, 82.

image of the city that SOM saw as the “New Milwaukee.”¹⁰⁰ This was part of their primary campaign to replace the "Genuine American" tagline that Milwaukee used to promote tourism throughout the 80s and early 90s.

The Spirit of Milwaukee (SOM), an influential civic group, embarked on a quest to redefine the city’s image away from its working-class heritage. Inspired by the Gateway Arch in St. Louis, the group decided that Milwaukee needed an iconic architectural monument to anchor its downtown redevelopment efforts. The group believed that stunning visual images produced the most robust identities of space and were directly inspired "by the Guggenheim's success in revitalizing Bilbao, Spain" before settling on hiring world-renowned architect Santiago Calatrava to design an addition to the Milwaukee Art Museum.¹⁰¹

Calatrava’s 2001 Quadracci Pavilion (“the Calatrava” to locals) would add 142,000 square feet to the 160,000 square feet of the previous two buildings, increasing exhibition space by 30,000 square feet. The other 112,000 square feet of space went to the full range of facilities now expected for a modern art museum: an auditorium, restaurant, gift shop, meeting and classrooms, and underground parking. The final cost of the building had risen from its initial price tag of \$38 million in 1997 to the \$122 million spent by the time it opened in 2001. Franz Schulz writes that “as sure as the city of Milwaukee will profit from the spectacular construction that has lately risen in its lakefront, the museum’s sphere of global influence will grow proportionally.”¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ J. Sherman, *Spirit Survey Sees Opportunity, More Work*. (OnMilwaukee.com, 2002).

¹⁰¹ Zimmerman, *From Brew Town to Cool Town*, 234.

¹⁰² Franz Schulze. *Building a Masterpiece: Milwaukee Art Museum*. (New York: Hudson Hills Press, Inc. 2001).

After completing the Calatrava-designed Quadracci Pavilion in 2001, Milwaukee recorded a measurable increase in tourism, the city received international recognition, and a localized high-rise residential real estate boom occurred in the city's downtown.¹⁰³ As a component of Milwaukee's larger pivot towards culture-led development, the Calatrava is a classic example of the "speculative development of space" associated with the neoliberal city.¹⁰⁴ The construction of the Calatrava building was celebrated as an event that signaled an end to Milwaukee's history of conservative urban planning. Rodriguez calls attention to local media coverage that used the Calatrava to push Milwaukee to abandon its industrial heritage and that the city could reverse its decline if it would just believe in itself.¹⁰⁵

Although it is well documented that public-private partnerships are increasingly being used in urban renewal efforts, doubts have been raised about the projects' ability to generate "citywide" benefits.¹⁰⁶ Flagship cultural projects, architecturally iconic museums in particular, tend to "increase local pride by reflecting a positive city image and giving economic confidence to local inhabitants, especially in cities suffering from industrial decline."¹⁰⁷ However, Keating and De Frantz argue that culture-led

¹⁰³ Bruce Murphy, "Hyper-segregated": It made Milwaukee famous. *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* (11, January 2003).

¹⁰⁴ Harvey, *Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism*; 3–17.

¹⁰⁵ Rodriguez, *Bootstrap New Urbanism*, 10.

¹⁰⁶ Tim Marshall. "Barcelona-Fast Forward? City Entrepreneurialism in the 1980s and 1990s." *European planning studies* 4, no. 2 (1996): 147–165.

¹⁰⁷ Elsa Vivant. "Who Brands Whom? The Role of Local Authorities in the Branching of Art Museums." *Town planning review* 82, no. 1 (2011), 102.

development strategies are simply politically correct tools used to pursue growth-based development strategies where the city's elite benefit at the expense of its people.¹⁰⁸

The boom in high-rise construction downtown coincided with widening income and racial inequalities, heightening the sociospatial contradictions of today's cities. The Milwaukee of today is a city known for its 'hypersegregation' and the high poverty and joblessness rates faced by the city's African American residents. From 2001 to 2005, over 70% of Milwaukee's fiscal revenue went towards improving its downtown, while a much smaller 22% of the budget was invested in retaining and attracting jobs to the city.¹⁰⁹ This amounts to around \$300 million of public subsidies to attract the "professional classes" and ensure an easy transition from one metropolitan area to another. Landmark projects like the Calatrava-designed MAM addition are explicitly intended to attract developers who construct high-income housing and benefit from the project's ability to raise nearby property values.

Starting with the 2001 redevelopment efforts, municipal action in Milwaukee has shifted towards an even more intense focus on central-area real estate investment policies.¹¹⁰ The unified growth-centered campaign sought to improve downtown Milwaukee's attractiveness by "amending the legacy of modernist planning in central Milwaukee through the corrective grammar of new urbanist design."¹¹¹ Public funds have increasingly been used to finance new downtown museums, showcase condominium

¹⁰⁸ Michael Keating and Monika de Frantz. "Culture-Led Strategies for Urban Regeneration: a Comparative Perspective on Bilbao." *International Journal of Iberian studies* 16, no. 3 (2004).

¹⁰⁹ R. Horton, *Growing Up: Analysis of City of Milwaukee Economic Development Efforts*. (Wisconsin Public Policy Forum, 2006).

¹¹⁰ Zimmerman, *From Brew Town to Cool Town*, 233.

¹¹¹ Zimmerman, 236.

towers, pedestrianization projects, nightlife districts, and loft conversions. Several scholars argue that this new urban planning paradigm of property-led development ignores intra-urban inequality and the plight of the working poor.

In fact, Jeffrey Zimmerman points to the unifying theme of the growth plan being a general encouragement of “professional class colonization of central Milwaukee through speculative development and zoning changes.”¹¹² Nevertheless, the new development strategy has produced successes for Milwaukee. Since embarking on the redevelopment effort, the fastest-growing census tract in the metropolitan area has shifted from the suburbs to the central city. In addition, the property-led residential boom in the central city quickly exceeded expectations.

As a hegemonic mode of discourse, Neoliberalism presents a powerful pro-gentrification narrative that proves difficult to challenge. By insisting on the inevitability of urban transformations and normalizing apathy while stigmatizing collective responsibility, these human-made systems and institutions appear to be as natural as the earth beneath our feet. So, Milwaukee's widening inequality, deepening poverty, and intensifying racial segregation did little to dampen the enthusiasm of Milwaukee's civic elite for the new development plan. As Zimmerman puts it, "Celebrations of the creative class by the Milwaukee growth coalition had the overall effect of repackaging gentrification and making it politically digestible to local planners and municipal actors desperate for simple solutions to complex urban problems."¹¹³

The Dual-City

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Zimmerman, 240.

The Illusion of Growth

A short history of the once-industrial Menomonee River Valley, which Mitchell Park overlooks, illustrates some of the larger changes to Milwaukee over the past five decades. Once a bustling hub of manufacturing, the Valley's problems began soon after the end of World War II. The construction of I-94, built as part of the 1956 Federal-Aid Highway Act, led factories to relocate to Milwaukee's suburbs increasingly.¹¹⁴ The Valley fell into further disrepair in the decades following the first bankruptcy of the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul, and Pacific Railroad (CMStP&P), often referred to as the "Milwaukee Road," in 1977. By 1986, the company declared bankruptcy for the final time before being bought by another railroad that sold its assets, primarily the rail infrastructure that made up a good portion of the Valley, leaving behind a toxic wasteland and what was once the state's largest brownfield.¹¹⁵ Once the site of thousands of manufacturing jobs, the Menominee River Valley was desolate for decades, with life only returning to the area after the city had made considerable efforts.¹¹⁶

In a 2013 report covering Milwaukee's economy, Professor Marc Levine, the founding former Director of the Center for Economic Development, calls attention to the impact of slow regional growth, which has led to a chronic job shortage not only in the central city but across the entire metropolitan area. The report emphasizes the impact that

¹¹⁴ John Gurda. "The Menomonee Valley: A Historical Overview." *Menomonee Valley Partners Website*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20081121220010/http://www.renewthevalley.org/files/pdf/GurdaValleyHistory.pdf>

¹¹⁵ Mary Beth Murphy. "New Jewel/Osco alienates some of its neighbors, delights others." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. Sept. 19, 1999.

¹¹⁶ Sophie Quinton, "Milwaukee Tries to Shed Its Rustbelt Image," *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, June 3, 2013), <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/06/milwaukee-tries-to-shed-its-rust-belt-image/425682/>.

the "relentless and substantial" loss of manufacturing employment, which was once the historical backbone that propelled so many into the middle class since the 1970s, has had in Milwaukee.¹¹⁷ Since 1980, Milwaukee has suffered a 14% decline in the number of jobs.¹¹⁸ Manufacturing employment in Milwaukee peaked in 1963 and has been on a downward trend thereafter. By 2011, the number of jobs in Milwaukee's manufacturing sector had declined 77% from its postwar high. Although the manufacturing sector represented 36% of Milwaukee's jobs in 1970, today, it accounts for less than 10%.

From 1970-2007, Milwaukee experienced the second-largest growth in income segregation in a ranking that compared all U.S. metropolitan areas, with the poverty rate nearly doubling in that same amount of time.¹¹⁹ Today, more than one-quarter of Milwaukee's residents live under the poverty line.¹²⁰ The industrial jobs that once provided upward mobility are long gone. From 1970-2000, the proportion of central city households considered middle-class decreased from 37% to 24%, losing ground on both sides to growth in poor and affluent families. Going back to the 1970s, Milwaukee has consistently ranked among the nation's most segregated metropolitan areas and holds the lowest rate of black suburbanization. Virtually all Black families in the metropolitan area are confined to the central city, with just 8.8% living in Milwaukee's suburbs. For comparison, Black suburbanization rates in peer cities like Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit range from 40-50%.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Levine, *Current State of the Milwaukee Economy*, 8.

¹¹⁸ Levine, 5.

¹¹⁹ Levine, 15.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Levine, 11.

Mitchell Park, situated away from downtown, overlooks a changed Menominee River Valley, the trains and industry long gone, replaced with recreational facilities like the Potawatomi Bingo Casino; and further revitalized in the early 2000s with a variety of light industrial development. The surrounding neighborhood, primarily Hispanic, has poverty rates nearly double Milwaukee's average. Once symbols of a bright future, facilities operated by Milwaukee County are now emblems of civic neglect and urban decline. The Domes, after years of deferred maintenance, are crumbling. Extensive cutbacks have led to staff shortages, and the conservatory is just one of the many County-run facilities in desperate need of more resources.

The role of cultural institutions, and how they must operate, have shifted alongside broader changes in urban management. To many, there is little hope for the conservatory if it remains with the County. Publicly run cultural facilities are no longer viable, and their operations should be left to nonprofits better able to "react to market opportunities" and shift into the 'experience-based role other museums embrace today.

Throughout the 21st century, Milwaukee's civic and business elites have refocused their energy on investing in public-private partnerships and building cultural institutions designed to attract the middle and upper classes back into the central city. Today, the Milwaukee Art Museum's \$122 million Santiago Calatrava-designed addition is meant to symbolize a new, postindustrial era. The limited power wielded by the still-troubled city is used on projects that might raise downtown property values and attracting gentrifiers. There does not appear to be a place for the Domes city's current downtown redevelopment-focused narrative, yet the facility's future is far from decided. Neoliberalism has become a hegemonic form of discourse, and growth-centric urban

development designed to attract gentrifiers and create the "optimal business climate" by lowering taxes and decreasing regulation. This remains the strategy of choice for today's urban regimes. The priorities of civic elites have shifted since the postwar period, with downtown redevelopment taking center stage and a new urban planning paradigm whose hegemony goes unchallenged.

Conclusion

The show dome, the first to finish construction, opened its doors to the public in 1964. In October of the following year, “Lady Bird” Johnson would dedicate the domes in a grand opening ceremony.¹ In her speech, the First Lady noted that “Other cities, would do well to look to Milwaukee’s record: 134 park locations, used nearly 12 million times each year...” On the Domes, Mrs. Johnson called the facility “one more step in the city’s steady and farsighted development of a park system.” In a letter from Mrs. Johnson where she reflected on her visit, she describes Milwaukee as “inspiring” before she went on to praise the Domes “I liked those three shimmering domes and the all-year gardens they hold inside.”²

The First Lady was visiting Milwaukee as part of her efforts to “beautify America.” Referencing the visit, Howard Gregg noted that “it will help promote and keep more understanding of the need for natural beauty in our lives today, as most of us are living in an urban environment where there is not enough of that.” News coverage echoed Howard, with one article noting that the “pomp and ceremony attending the dedication of the Mitchell Park Conservatory domes are fitting for what park officials believe is the most unusual horticultural facility in the world.”³ One published letter noted that the opinions of visitors to Milwaukee’s county parks and horticultural gardens were good

¹ Alan J. Strekow, ed., *Gardens Under Glass: Mitchell Park Domes* (Milwaukee, WI: The Friends of the Domes, 2012): 12-13.

² “City Is ‘Inspiring,’ First Lady Writes,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Oct. 1, 1965.

³ Robert A. Witas, “Lady Bird Dedicates Nature Domes,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Sept. 22, 1965.

reminders that the city's "park system is among the country's finest." The letter goes on to say that "this should be an occasion not only for pride but also for gratitude for those public officials and private citizens, too many of them unsung, who have labored so long and well to provide use with these facilities that have rightfully made Milwaukee the envy of the nation."⁴

In 1934, parks in Milwaukee County existed under seven different jurisdictions, each a separate taxing unit. Three years later, at the height of the depression, these facilities coalesced under the County's jurisdiction.⁵ By 1963, Milwaukee's 12,000-acre county park system contained well over 100 parks and parkways, ranging from a block to a square mile in size. A Journal article boasted that park "authorities" agreed that the Milwaukee County Park system was one of the best in the nation, taking a "back seat to few, if any, public park systems throughout the country." The parks were further cited as one of the best reasons for "travelers to visit Milwaukee, and for Milwaukeeans to spend a vacation at home."⁶

The completion of many large-scale civic projects the city embarked on throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, and the optimistic mood inspired by the First Lady's 1964 commencement of the Domes, were indicative of a new Milwaukee that had escaped its oft-derided "lady thrift" reputation. Sewer Socialism was relegated to the history books with Mayor Zeidler's exit in 1960, and a growth-based vision supplanted

⁴ "Look Here!" *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Sept. 22, 1965.

⁵ "Parks, Recreation and Culture Functions," *Milwaukee Journal*, Oct. 29, 1967.

⁶ "County Parks 'On Display,'" *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Apr. 4, 1964.

the last vestiges of working-class politics. Under the surface, however, was a wave of festering anger fed by the city's increasing inequality.

The 1967 Milwaukee riot, one of the 159 inner-city revolts that swept the United States during the "Long Hot Summer of 1967," began in response to the lack of any real change seen in the dual problems of housing discrimination and police brutality, which had long impacted the city's African American residents. The riots began on the evening of July 30th, 1967, and would see a curfew imposed on the entire city, lead to the deaths of at least three people, 100 injuries, and the arrest of 1,740 people before the national guard restored order on August 3rd. Sporadic violence continued as several fair housing marches throughout August saw white residents clashing with Black demonstrators.⁷

One *Milwaukee Journal* article, written in 1968, covered one of the new intercity programs the state had financed in response to the rioting of the previous summer "Echo Writers' Workshop," a creative space meant to provide an emotional outlet for Milwaukee's Black minors. One of the workshop participants, whose art centered on his feelings about "black culture, white prejudice, and being put down," explained that he was still angry, but writing had "made it less necessary for him to act it out." The article goes on to explain that part of the program's effort has been "directed to giving the writers new experiences on which to draw, such as visits to the Mitchell Park Conservatory, interviews on radio, and talks with visiting celebrities."⁸

The Time is Out of Joint

⁷ John Eligon, "Racial Violence in Milwaukee Was Decades in the Making, Residents Say," *The New York Times* (Aug. 15, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/15/us/racial-violence-in-milwaukee-was-decades-in-the-making-residents-say.html>.

⁸ "Writers' Workshop Builds Confidence," *Milwaukee Journal*, Sept. 10, 1968.

The history of Mitchell Park, and that of its Conservatory, illustrates the changing metropolis amidst the uneven geographic development of capitalism. The rise of globalization, the increasing power of peripheral suburbs, and the exponential increase in “white-flight” drained the Frost Belt cities of the Midwest and Northeast of their industry, tax base, and prestige throughout the 1970s.

The Domes, constructed in the heart of the city’s industrial district, suddenly found themselves in the middle of Wisconsin’s largest brownfield. Today, the problems with the Mitchell Park Domes are legion, with cracks in the glass becoming increasingly visible over the last twenty years. In 2016, a falling chunk of concrete led to the closure of the Desert Dome, which was then followed by the closure of the remaining two domes for the better part of a year as thorough inspections took place. As water damage continues to build and the costs to repair the iconic midcentury structures grow exponentially, the structure's lifespan shortens further. Currently, the County seems unwilling or unable to either renovate the Domes or make a decision that would require them to foot the bill for their demolition, which has resulted in the need for periodic investment in steel mesh screens. Due to the potential safety issues, the Domes receive a thorough inspection every other year. The inspections require the Conservatory to be closed for their duration, a process that can take several months. The average cost for each inspection is \$500,000 without accounting for lost revenue from the closures, further decreasing attendance.⁹

Mitchell Park, situated on a bluff overlooking the once-industrial Menominee River Valley, which once collectively provided the largest concentration of industrial

⁹ ConsultEcon, Inc. and HGA, *Feasibility Study Phase I*, II-3.

employment in Wisconsin, became the state's largest brownfield after manufacturing fled the area. When the manufacturing employers left, the surrounding area became increasingly impoverished. In 2000, over half of the 66,000 residents living in areas surrounding the Valley were minorities—predominantly African American to the north and Latinx/Hispanic to the south—with incomes 33% lower than the city average.¹⁰ The regional shift of industry away from Milwaukee and other “Frost Belt” cities left a scar in the once-industrial region surrounding the Domes, a consequence of the uneven spatial development that drives capitalist development.

As David Harvey explains:

Capitalist development must negotiate a knife-edge between preserving the values of past commitments made at a particular place and time or devaluing them to open up new room for accumulation. Capitalism perpetually strives, therefore, to create a social and physical landscape in its image and requisite to its own needs at a particular point in time, only just as certainly to undermine, disrupt, and even destroy that landscape at a later point in time. The inner contradictions of capitalism are expressed through the restless formation and re-formations of geographical landscapes. This is the tune to which the historical geography of capitalism must dance without cease.¹¹

The "restless formations and re-formations of geographical landscapes," a process sometimes referred to as creative destruction, is an essential aspect of urbanization and is a concept examined in this thesis. Clearly, the landscape of Mitchell Park is a capitalist one, as each chapter covers an era characterized by long phases of expansive growth ending in recession, depression, and social upheaval. However, the true story is complex, and the history of Mitchell Park should not be thought of as predetermined. The inner

¹⁰ Menomonee Valley Benchmark Initiative (MVBI). (2005). *State of the Valley report. Milwaukee: MVBI.*

¹¹ David Harvey. “The Geopolitics of Capitalism,” in Gregory and Urry (eds) *Social Relations and Spatial Structures*, (1985), 150.

contradictions of capitalism are blurred through human agency, the layered context of Milwaukee, and numerous other social and cultural factors explored throughout this thesis. Still, understanding the "knife-edge" that is capitalist development helps make sense of the ways power is structured, and exploitation is hidden, in all three chapters.

Both conservatories, the Victorian greenhouse of 1898 and the modern Domes of the 1960s, were built during periods of rapid change and increased loss of identity. Monuments, which serve a multitude of roles within the contemporary city, are vital parts of urban public space. It is crucial to consider the many ways modern civic monuments like the Domes impact the social and cultural spheres of the city. For example, they act as a representation of collective memory, play a role in ongoing sociocultural changes; form national identities, and connect to the ways the Entrepreneurial City markets itself through image and branding. It is equally essential to consider monuments' connection to politics, often representing the state's hegemony over memory and public spaces.

As Lefebvre points out:

[M]onuments which *magically* (original emphasis) concentrate not only the prestige of the state and the power of the rulers but also all the artificiality of empty celebrations, ceremonies, and rituals—not to mention a host of mystical ideas, grandiose theories, and 'official' abstractions; their only real purpose, however, is to proclaim, to express—and indeed to betray—the 'will to power.'¹²

However, in discussing how we should interpret the meaning, significance, and impact of monuments, he further warns that representational space is complex and should

¹² Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*; Translated by John Moore; with a Preface by Michel Trebitsch. London; Verso, (1991), 252.

not be approached with symbolic interpretation alone. To Lefebvre, monumental space is a product of an extensive web of meaning.¹³

The Calatrava

In 2016, the National Trust for Historic Preservation placed the Domes in their list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places, and only a year later listed them as a National Treasure, writing that "[a]long with the soaring wingspan of the Milwaukee Art Museum, and the iconic breweries throughout the city, the Mitchell Park Domes are an essential and defining part of Milwaukee's urban landscape."¹⁴ Throughout the 21st century, Milwaukee's civic and business elites have refocused their energy on investing in public-private partnerships and building cultural institutions designed to attract the middle and upper classes back into the central city. Today, the Milwaukee Art Museum's \$122 million Santiago Calatrava-designed addition is meant to symbolize a new, post-Fordist era.

The culture-led development strategy kicked off by the Art Museum's expansion was framed as a way to bring Milwaukee into the 21st century and attract high-tech jobs. There is little doubt that the Calatrava elevated Milwaukee's image, providing the city with a landmark to anchor its culture-led renewal strategies. Additionally, the facility has spurred new development projects, generated measurable increases in tourism, and revitalized Milwaukee's lakefront. After the museum completed these renovations, they measured a 43% increase in attendance since 2000. The Associated Press reported that over that same period, the economic impact of the Art Museum on Milwaukee grew by

¹³ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Oxford: Blackwell, (1991), 143.

¹⁴ Peter Zanghi and Stephanie Meeks, "Why the Domes Must Be Saved," (June 24, 2018).

44% to over \$20 million.¹⁵ Speaking at the dedication, Milwaukee's Mayor Tom Barrett noted that the Calatrava had become the city's unofficial symbol, used in marketing and national coverage. The addition spurred nearby projects like the Discovery World Museum, a nearby state park, and two high rises. Barrett concluded by stating that "In the short six years it's been in existence, it really has helped not only transform our image and update our image, but it's also worked as a catalyst along the lakefront."¹⁶

However, the connection between culture-led development strategies and economic growth is not so clear. In the twenty years that have passed since the opening of the Calatrava designed addition, Milwaukee has, in total, lost 6,000 jobs. The city's 2019 poverty rate of 22.4% makes it one of the nation's most impoverished metro areas.¹⁷ Today, the median household income in Milwaukee is \$6,000 less than it was in 2000. The contracting median household income is less than Milwaukee's recorded median income was in 1980, with the inner city seeing the sharpest decline. White city residents, mainly located downtown, were least harmed by the Great Recession and quickly recovered. Furthermore, Milwaukee's population has been in slow or no growth mode since 2000. The latest census data on net domestic migration ranked Milwaukee 370th of 384 metro areas. Around 39,000 people moved out of the city in the last decade; most were young adults between eighteen and thirty. Although the birth rate was high enough

¹⁵ Carrie Antlfinger, "Milwaukee Art Museum Uses FANCY Expansion to Help Turnaround," *JournalStar.com* (The Associated Press, September 9, 2007), https://journalstar.com/entertainment/arts-and-theatre/milwaukee-art-museum-uses-fancy-expansion-to-help-turnaround/article_0854fd20-1aa3-5164-b2ce-31d69057ec1c.html.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ John Johnson, "What's Going on with Milwaukee's Population?" *Marquette University Law School Faculty Blog*, (25 Mar. 2020), law.marquette.edu/facultyblog/2019/08/whats-going-on-with-milwaukees-population/.

to offset these losses, Milwaukee struggles to both keep those kids here once they grow up or attract new residents to replace them. The core economic problems facing Milwaukee are economic and racial inequality, wage stagnation, corporate disinvestment, and regional fragmentation. The culture-led redevelopment efforts, centered on a flagship art museum, do not directly confront these problems. The museum may have created a small renaissance in Milwaukee's downtown, but it has not been able to change the direction the city is heading in any meaningful way.¹⁸

¹⁸ Ibid.

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