Tenements

Tenements helped answer the growing demand for housing in major urban centers throughout the mid-1800s and early 1900s. While more affluent city residents were relocating to more desirable areas, immigrants were flooding into America's cities. New York's Lower East Side especially became the landing point of countless immigrant families. Former single-family homes were retrofitted and subdivided to accommodate multiple families. In some instances, new floors were added to the tops of the buildings and additions were added onto the backs to accommodate more people.

At the same time, new tenement buildings were quite literally on the rise. Most tenements were five to seven stories tall, twenty-five feet wide, and one hundred feet deep. Buildings were built as close together as possible in an effort to maximize space. This resulted in limited air circulation. Most rooms in tenement buildings received no natural light. To make matters worse, the buildings were built quickly and inexpensively with poor or no plumbing and, in many instances, no fire escapes. Tenements facilitated the rapid spread of disease, as in 1849 when some five thousand people died from cholera in New York City. The proximity of these buildings, as well as their poor ventilation and building materials, also made them susceptible to fire. This was the case in Chicago in 1871 when a fire destroyed numerous city blocks.

There were some early efforts to regulate tenements in the late 1860s, including the Tenement House Act that required buildings to have a minimum of one toilet for every twenty occupants. However, these laws generally went unenforced. It was not until Jacob Riis, a Danish author and photographer, published his book, *How the Other Half Lives*, in 1890 that true reform took place. Riis's book depicted the ghastly conditions of America's inner-city poor, calling attention to the cramped and unsanitary living conditions and the shockingly high infant mortality rate. The Tenement House Law of 1901 worked to rectify these abominations and prevent them from happening in the future. New building codes were issued, and tenement buildings were modified to meet the new codes.

City Sanitation

Few cities had a worse reputation for sanitation than New York during the 1800s. Poor plumbing, limited waste removal, and cramped housing meant that refuse was generally dumped out of windows and onto the street, or into nearby rivers or the ocean. It was not until 1881 that the city made a concerted effort to improve conditions with the creation of the Department of Street Cleaning. Unfortunately, the agency was extremely corrupt and largely ineffective. In 1895, George E. Waring Jr., a former Civil War general, assumed the position of commissioner and introduced sweeping reforms to the agency. Waring's innovations included setting garbage collection days, street sweeping, and implementing a garbage sorting process to reuse or repurpose as much refuse as possible. Waring's efforts proved so transformative within just a year that his sanitation workers were cheered enthusiastically by city residents during a parade for the agency in 1896. Despite Waring's best efforts, however, the city continued dumping garbage into the ocean until 1934.

Political Machines

Cities were ill prepared for the massive number of immigrants that arrived in the United States during the 1800s and early 1900s. Limited housing and poor infrastructure were compounded by the inability to effectively assist immigrant populations as they entered the country. Through the mid- to late 1800s, political machines in cities like New York evolved to meet this demand.

The standard political machine operated with a clear hierarchy: the political boss reigned at the top while individuals at various levels worked to organize supporters in smaller sections of the city. Organizers reached out to immigrants and helped them find jobs and housing in exchange for their political support come election time. Successful organizers received patronage jobs in exchange for their service.

Though political machines are generally viewed as corrupt institutions, they played a key role in facilitating the assimilation of immigrants into American society and improving the services that cities offered. In many instances, they also helped support the growth of businesses in urban areas.

Tammany Hall

Tammany Hall is perhaps the most notorious political machine in American history. Established in New York City in 1789, Tammany Hall's functions were both political and philanthropic in nature. The organization was closely aligned to the anti-Federalist Democratic Party; the leadership of Tammany Hall was generally the same as that of the local Democratic Party. Beyond getting Democratic candidates elected to office, Tammany Hall dedicated its efforts to helping urban poor and immigrants.

Much of the work that Tammany Hall did was beneficial to society, including helping recent immigrants, especially the Irish, find employment and housing. Local ward leaders would often provide assistance to individuals who faced legal troubles and give gifts of food around the holidays. Naturally, these actions garnered political support from the city's downtrodden, and they voted for Tammany Hall and Democratic Party candidates at the polls.

The influence of Tammany Hall waxed and waned throughout the 1800s and 1900s, as various reform groups worked to undercut the organization's corruption and influence in New York politics. Tammany Hall was fatally weakened by the efforts of New York City Mayor Fiorello La Guardia and President Franklin D. Roosevelt through the 1930s and 1940s. Tammany Hall's influence completely came to an end in the 1960s.

Boss Tweed

William Tweed, commonly referred to as Boss Tweed, was one of the most powerful leaders in Tammany Hall's long history. Born in 1823 in New York City, Tweed came from a modest background. Holding a number of skilled positions through his early career, Tweed secured his first elected position in 1851 as an alderman. Tweed began moving through the Tammany Hall hierarchy at a rapid pace, securing a position on New York City's newly formed city board of supervisors as well as other positions in the city's government. Tweed, like all political bosses, used his power and influence to place his friends in other positions of power.

By 1868, Tweed was not only a principal leader of Tammany Hall but was also a state senator. Tweed's firm control over Tammany Hall meant that he was in control of New York's Democratic Party, not just at the city level, but also at the state level. Numerous politicians were in Tweed's pocket, among them, the governor, the mayor of New York City, and the speaker of the state assembly. In 1870, Tweed managed to gain control over New York City's treasury and proceeded to siphon as much as $200 million from the city's coffers.

Tweed's reign was eventually toppled by the expository cartoons of Thomas Nast published in *Harper's Weekly* and the legal efforts of reformer Samuel J. Tilden. Other publications also contributed to Tweed's demise, including the *New York Times*. Tweed was arrested and sent to prison in 1873. He was released two years later only to be arrested and imprisoned again. Tweed managed to escape to Cuba and Spain for a brief time before being recaptured and sent back to New York City where he died in prison in 1878.