Albany at the Crossroads of a Strategic Region

AUTHOR
Daniel M. Abramson

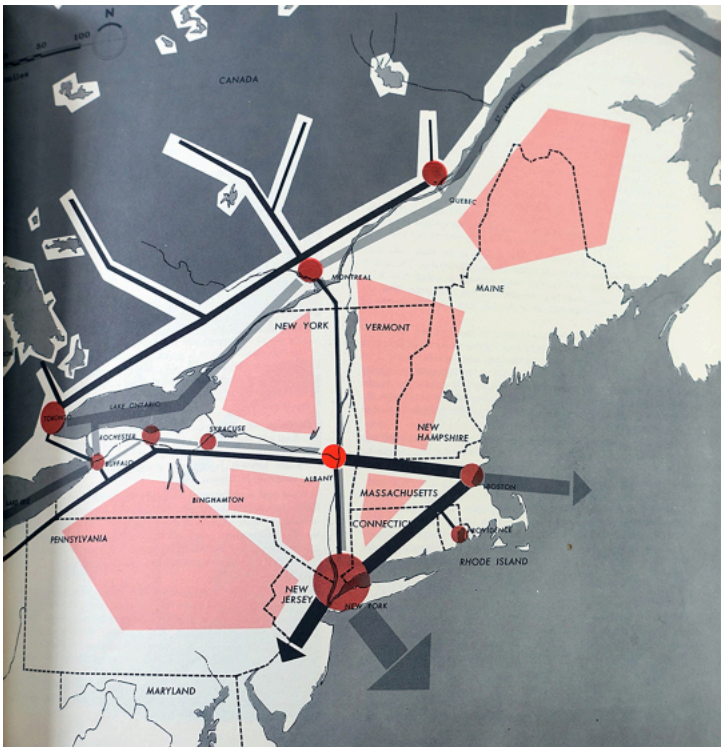

Fig. 1. "Albany at the Crossroads of a Strategic Region," The Associated Planners.
Albany: Report on the Capital City [Interim Report of the Commission and Reconnaissance Report of the Panners], Temporary State Commission on the Capital City (Albany, 1962).

In 1962, Albany, the capital city of New York State, was designated "the crossroads of a strategic region" encompassing the Atlantic seaboard, the Great Lakes, eastern Canada, and New England. What did the regional crossroads designation mean? What were its consequences? Among other labors, region thinking justified urban renewal and left an architectural afterimage: a monumental, government ensemble for a rationalized liberal-economic region indeterminate in form and, at its crossroads center, emptied of inhabitants.

In 1962, Albany, the capital city of New York State, was at a crossroads. More precisely, an official plan *put* Albany at "the crossroads of a strategic region" encompassing the Atlantic seaboard, the Great Lakes, eastern Canada, and New England (**fig. 1**).[1] How did provincial Albany become the "crossroads" of a stupendous "super-region"? What did

the new designation mean? What were its consequences? And what might this episode say about regional thinking generally, as epistemic construct, heuristic device, and technique of governance? The crossroads figure connotes indeterminacy at the regional plan's boundaries and center, too. Moreover, the plan's result in terms of design was not regional but rather architectural—a monumental government center complex emptied of inhabitants (**fig. 2**).

Fig. 2. Empire State Plaza, Albany, New York, 1961–76, Harrison & Abramowitz, M. Rotival, and others.
Photograph courtesy of Vincent Conroy.

Albany: Report on the Capital City was produced in 1962 for the Temporary State Commission on the Capital City, appointed by the New York State Legislature, Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller, and Albany mayor Erastus Corning 2nd. The immediate context was the rapidly growing postwar New York State government's need for more office space. A campus on Albany's outskirts three miles from the downtown Capitol had been begun in the early 1950s by the previous governor, Thomas Dewey, on land cheaper, more open, and more convenient for a suburbanizing society. Where would further building activity take place?

Governor Rockefeller, inaugurated in 1959, desired urban recentralization for Albany, a mid-sized city of 130,000 people located 150 miles up the Hudson River from New York City. Suffering deindustrialization, the city sought revival as a major upstate economic and transport nexus—the very reasons why it had been selected as the state capital nearly two centuries earlier. Rockefeller had a special eye for the half mile he regularly traversed between the Executive Mansion and Capitol, an area filled mainly with old, working-class housing.[2] Scion of a famous family, Rockefeller

had promoted modern architecture and urban planning in New York City and the Venezuelan capital of Caracas. He had a penchant, too, observed an associate, to appoint commissions "to give the appearance of detached judgment to what he had already decided to do."[3]

The Temporary State Commission's eleven members convened in mid-1961 and held public hearings. They had state regional planning director George Dudley, a Rockefeller confidant, recommend three firms to collaborate as The Associated Planners on a comprehensive plan for Albany, one that would include study of potential locations for new state office construction. A locally connected architect, John Calbreath Burdis, was teamed with Baltimore architect and urban designer Archibald C. Rogers, plus the Connecticut-based city and regional planner Maurice Rotival, a Frenchman. Seventy years old in 1962, Rotival was the senior member of the planning team. He knew Rockefeller from Venezuela and had helped plan capital cities around the world (e.g., Caracas, Algiers, Baghdad, and Paris), as well as New Haven, Connecticut, where he had been a professor of city planning at Yale University since 1939 and had team-authored (with Dudley) *The Case for Regional Planning, with Special Reference to New England* (1947). Rotival defined the concept of a region as "the community which offers the greatest opportunity for taking advantage of the vast potentialities, made possible by modern technology and institutions, for moulding the material environment to the satisfaction of human needs."[4] Thus understanding that any individual city's functions and future depended upon larger, mainly economic geographies, Rotival pushed for an expanded Albany study.

Unbidden, Rotival's application to the commission envisioned the Albany plan as regional, framed by its "social economic 'universes,'" he wrote to the commission chair, "which in the case of Albany will carry the investigation to the North, to the St. Lawrence, to the Great Lakes complex and to the south towards New York City and the open seas."[5] Upon their hire, the planners persuaded the commission that "study of [Albany's] problems would have to consider regional characteristics."

In 1962 and 1963, The Associated Planners produced both interim and final reports, issued as lavish, fifty-plus-page color booklets.[7] The planners' analyses began with what Rotival termed a "reconnaissance," an effort "rapidly done at the beginning, in order to define the pertinent areas or 'universes' to be studied."[8] "Universes" constituted Rotival's concept for distinct geographic-economic entities at a variety

of scales, from neighborhoods and cities to regions and super-regions, the term thus enabling the planner to work across all these dimensions.

The Albany studies featured six concentric "universes"—each distinct on its own though interdependent upon each other—nested outward and linked by highways from the settlement's historic inner core, then to the city's political boundaries, and finally to an agglomerated tri-city urbanized area including Troy and Schenectady, a broader Hudson and Mohawk valley economic zone with the New York State region ultimately dominant within it, a final "Northeast Super-Region." This last designated area stretched capaciously from Quebec to Cleveland to Washington, DC, in the 1962 interim report. A vast transnational territory, this designated space encompassed a quarter of the US population and regions of the most dynamic Canadian population growth and economic activity, particularly in resource extraction. The final 1963 report imagined this super-region expanding in 1980 to Chicago and Charleston, South Carolina, and to Nova Scotia and Labrador in Canada. Rotival's regional framing, employed in other South American and European studies, was characteristically supranational, which he perceived as the best path to stability and prosperity after the chaos of world wars and postcolonial fractures.[9]

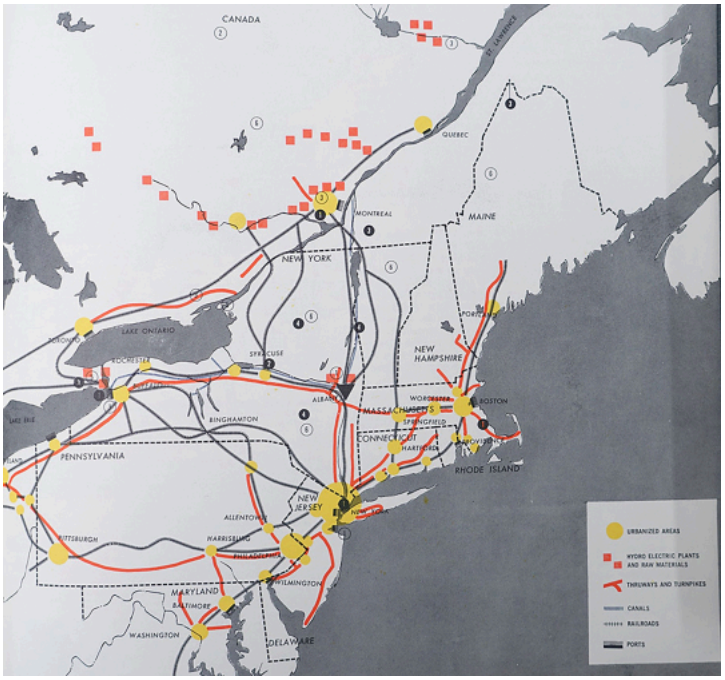

Fig. 3. Northeast Super-Region, The Associated Planners. *Albany: Report on the Capital City [Interim Report of the Commission and Reconnaissance Report of the Panners]*, Temporary State Commission on the Capital City (Albany, 1962).

The Albany reports' regional analyses and visual representations focused on demography, economic activities, and especially transportation infrastructure links. Highways crisscross the vast territory like red snakes in the super-region map (**fig. 3**). On the planning map, Albany appears as a black triangle and as a singular focal element rather than one of the many yellow circles designated "urbanized areas." The analytical rationalization and visual syntax replace the city's demographic population status with its regional economic role as "an important exchange center" with "historically directed routes through the Albany area."[10] Most gloriously, this had been the nineteenth-century state-built Erie Canal, by then defunct for a half century. Its Hudson River terminus at Albany transshipped goods between the midwestern Great Lakes and the Atlantic world, growing the Empire State into a regional power. The canal trade spurred economic prosperity and more generally enabled continental colonization.[11] With the regional initiative, the planners endorsed construction of a northern "Champlain" waterway that would connect the recently completed Canadian St. Lawrence Seaway to the Atlantic via the Hudson River and an enhanced Albany port. However, Rotival prophesied that the "recent expressways" would be largely responsible for having" opened unlimited horizons for Albany." Significantly, according to historians, the aims of the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 included "directing regional development" to regulate metropolitan growth and facilitate commerce.[12]

Rotival graphically emphasized Albany's "unlimited horizons" in a simplified, diagrammatic map of the Northeast super-region (see **fig. 1**). Multiple snaking transportation routes are reduced to thick, straight vectors centered on Albany. Political boundaries are merely thin dashed lines, while export arrows point toward the south and east. In the study's logic, crossroads Albany thus occupies the balanced center of a supranational, regional-economic imaginary, rationalized and visualized as combining stabilized equilibrium with dynamic diagonality.

Diagrams like these were Rotival's "main design instrument for his post-war concepts in the U.S.," historian Carola Hein explains, and were "accepted more easily" by American audiences wooed by Rotival's regional vision that obscured troublesome local details.[13] Rotival edified his fellow planners and a luncheon audience of Albany advertising men in 1962 with just such a diagram demonstration, telling them that their city "holds the most fantastic position in the world

… at the crossroad of a future empire of the northeast" (**fig. 4**).[14]

TIMES-UNION***R Albany, Tues., Mar. 6, 1962 10

Principals at the Tri-Cities Ad Club meeting last night watch Maurice E. H. Rotival of New York use the charcoal pencil on a rough sketch of the tri-city area. Watching from left, are John C. Burdis of Albany; George Laird, Niagara Mohawk Corp., and vice president of the club, and Archibald C. Rogers of Baltimore.

Planners See Boundless Future For City, 'Crossroads of Empire'

By SEAN RYAN
Times-Union Staff Writer

Three internationally ning must be based on Albany being part of Tri-Cities area.

The planners, working with ing appearance last night on the same platform, they addressed the Tri-Cities Area Advertising Club at the pointed out while describing some of the countless problems facing the planners. He said "Albany is only one part

Fig. 4. "Planners See Boundless Future for City."
"Planners See Boundless Future for City, 'Crossroads of Empire,'" *Times-Union* (Albany), March 6, 1962.

Such a super-region had not been invented specifically for the Albany plan. Rotival had envisioned a vast "Northeastern Zone" in his 1947 *Regional Planning* volume. But in that earlier iteration, Albany was a gateway to New England and not a center. It had similar peripherality in the famous 1961 study of the Eastern Seaboard, *Megalopolis*, in which author Jean Gottmann excluded Albany from the distinctively dense region depicted in that work.[15] Gottmann, an academic geographer, studied the region historically and as territorially bounded. Rotival, the professional planner, favored economics, as well as unbounded concentric "universes" scaled along transport vectors neither overdetermined nor circumscribed by geography, history, or culture. Rotival's approach to regional thinking as a tool for development also generated from a single point: the study's sponsoring city. A region's center could be as indeterminate as its borders, depending on which city's planning structure initiated the larger regional frame.

Rationalizing and visualizing Albany as a crossroads of an indeterminate region did important work. The crossroads designation created an illusion of centrality for Albany at the hinge between, rather than the periphery of, the Great Lakes

and Atlantic territories. Centering provincial Albany in a transnational "super-region" to echo the city's relevance during the Erie Canal's heyday, with a nod to its highway-driven future, flattered political leaders' ambitions for the capital and for the State of New York as "the greatest and most powerful State in the Union," the report boasted.[16]

Diagramming vectors converging on Albany's core as part of a syntax of regional visualization also overdetermined the recommendation to reconcentrate state office buildings at the crosshairs downtown. The studies' analyses considered but dismissed alternative locations for new state offices on the city's outskirts, judging such locations as inadequate for connecting government with Albany's economic regeneration. The crossroads figure justified a central location for the new office complex, but the regional plan also negated the center as a place of density, the locus of a region decentralized by the highway system upon which its plan was scaffolded.

Planners' use of crossroads language and imagery in the two reports symbolized capitalist free-trade ideology, diagrammed as unfettered supranational transportation vectors of unlimited bounds. At the same time, crossroads rhetoric resonated culturally with deep notions of these places as sites of fateful choice and liminality, as paths converging and diverging on empty ground in the landscape. "In cultures spanning much of the planet," writes English literature scholar Bill Angus, "crossroads have been regarded as uncanny places where strange and disturbing things are likely to happen," such as trickster meetings, outcast burials, and bargains with the devil.[17]

Indeed, the planners knew the regional "crossroads" designations and spaces were ambiguous, even undercutting Albany's status and prospects. Compared to the primary places they connect, crossroads are marginal locations, as implied in the map omitting Albany as an "urbanized area" (**fig. 3**). As the planners frankly admitted, "Cities [New York, Boston, Albany, Buffalo] at [the] end of axes overshadow Albany."[18] At a crossroads there is an indeterminacy, an uncertainty that may be temporal as well as spatial. The choice of whether or not to reconcentrate state offices downtown would be fateful for Albany's future. Choose correctly or else, the report warned, for "a crossroads can become a focal point or a bypass depending on the course which it elects to follow."[19]

The reports' regional crossroads framing also seems disconnected from or even at cross-purposes with the primary city planning objectives. Insisting upon Albany's

regional reach potentially conflicts with the goal of economic reconcentration. Albany's centrality sits in tension with the boundless outward vectors in the regional diagram. And in the reports' text, large-scale regional diagnoses bear no narrative relation to the primary recommendation to relocate state offices downtown into a concentrated architectural "Capital Image." Indeed, the regional framing appears to be a sleight of hand, a trickster's conjuration. Planners demonstrated to clients and public audiences their professional thoroughness and competence before offering conclusions about office location disconnected from the regional context. Generating a region out of crossroads language and imagery drew attention away from the particulars of the plan's local target.

What work did regional thinking and visualization do in the Albany plan, both epistemologically and heuristically, and also as a technique of governance? Planners used regional thinking's self-evidence for professional authority, with a visual language dating back to nineteenth-century German zoning maps. Regional thinking aggrandized a provincial municipality as the "crossroads" of a stupendous territory, fantasizing revived canal-era trading glory, and converged with other contemporary New York State planning schemes in which Albany appeared as one nexus in a regional highway network.[20] In the *Capital City* reports, no one questioned that a mid-size city's plan must have a vast territorial context that would flatter the client political leaders. Indeed, designating provincial Albany a regional "crossroads" connoted that nearly any site in regional thinking can be a regional center. It generates its own bespoke territory, albeit one that is arbitrary, indeterminate, and infinite in variability, as it is a product of politics, technique, rhetoric, history, and imagination.

Regional thinking thus appears as both context and pretext for a probably predetermined local decision. At the same, the regional crossroads conceit embodied a particular political-economic argument and spatial logic. The crossroads center targeted Albany's population core as the appropriate site for state office building reconcentration. At this point, emptied of inhabitants, government is thus substituted for citizens. But both citizens and state are treated similarly as objects in the larger economic redevelopment operation. Economics trump people and politics in this regional maneuver, embodying a persistent neoliberalism in American political economy.

The future did not happen as planners had projected. Albany never metamorphosed into a grand crossroads. The

northward canal linking the St. Lawrence Seaway to the Atlantic via Albany failed to materialize. Nor did Albany's population increase by thirty thousand by 1980; instead, it decreased by that number. Metropolitan decentralization continued. The state office campus on the city's outskirts grew to number twenty buildings, housing as many employees as downtown offices.

Still, on the forty-block, ninety-eight-acre downtown site between the Capitol and Executive Mansion, thousands of buildings and people were removed, thereby fulfilling Rockefeller's early urban renewal wish "to promote the new project as slum clearance," as a historian of the project notes.[21] Thus, substituting state government—*qua*–economic development for a working-class population lay at the heart of the regional plan. By the mid-1970s and at a cost of $2 billion, there had arisen a monumental elevated complex, adumbrated by Rotival and executed by New York architect Wallace K. Harrison, a Rockefeller family favorite hired between the release of the two reports. A forty-four-story structure towers over no fewer than nine additional marble-clad buildings, extruded upward from a quarter-mile-long, five-story platform topped by an open marble plaza and reflecting pool (**fig. 5**, and see **fig. 2**). The whole was linked via its own spur expressway to the continental interstate system, thus demonstrating the connection between regional planning and urban renewal, the former's highway imperative leading to the latter's local disruptions.

Fig. 5. Aerial view of Empire State Plaza and Albany region.
flickr.com, Albany Group Archive,
https://www.flickr.com/photos/albanygroup/9290329677.

The bombastic scale of the South Mall (later renamed the Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller Empire State Plaza) is usually attributed to Rockefeller's ego alone. But the complex's genesis in the planners' regional framing, as detailed here, situates the Empire State Plaza's monumentality in its generative territorial context. Others besides Rockefeller, like planner Maurice Rotival, should be credited with its large-scale spirit.

The Empire State Plaza is arguably the progeny and residue of the planners' regional thinking. Building scale embodies the aspiring rally cry "Albany at the Crossroads of a Strategic Region." Alongside its many other labors, regional thinking and visualizations left an architectural afterimage in Albany: a monumental, government ensemble as both control point and synecdoche for a rationalized liberal-economic region indeterminate in form and, at its crossroads center, emptied of inhabitants.

✓ Transparent peer-reviewed

Daniel M. Abramson, "Albany at the Crossroads of a Strategic Region," *Aggregate* 14 (April 2026), https://doi.org/10.53965/WYQN8466.

1 Temporary State Commission on the Capital City, *Albany: Report on the Capital City [Interim Report of the Commission*

and Reconnaissance Report of the Planners] (Albany, NY, 1962) (cited hereafter as Commission on the Capital City, *Interim Report*). ↑

2 For Rockefeller's desire to redevelop the area "from the present Capitol Building south … [which] stems from the fact of the Governor's Mansion," see A. C. Rogers, Memorandum, 22 February 1962, Box 77, Maurice Emil Henri Rotival Papers (MS 1380), Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library. See also other manuscript material in Box 77. ↑

3 Nicholas Dagen Bloom, *How States Shaped Postwar America: State Government and Urban Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 26. ↑

4 Directive Committee on Regional Planning - Yale University, quoted in *The Case for Regional Planning, with Special Reference to New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press; London: Oxford University Press, 1947), 4. ↑

5 Maurice E. H. Rotival to Malcolm Wilson, Chairman of the Temporary State Commission on the Capital City, 17 July 1961, Folder 10, Box 8, series 10822-98, New York State Archives. ↑

6 Temporary State Commission on the Capital City, *Albany: Plan for the Capital City [Report of the Commission and Report of the Planners]* (Albany, NY, 1963), 2. ↑

7 Commission on the Capital City, *Interim Report*. ↑

8 Commission on the Capital City, *Interim Report*, 50. ↑

9 See Carola Hein, "Maurice Rotival: French Planning on a World-Scale [parts I and II]," *Planning Perspectives* 17, no. 3 (2002): 247–65; and 17, no. 4 (2002): 325–44. ↑

10 Rotival to Wilson, 17 July 1961; Commission on the Capital City, *Interim Report*, 8. ↑

11 For the Erie Canal, see Warren Roberts, *A Place in History: Albany in the Age of Revolution, 1775–1825* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), esp. chap. 4; Ronald E. Shaw, *Erie Water West: A History of the Erie Canal, 1792–1854* (1966; Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990); Brad L. Utter, Ashley Hopkins-Benton, Karen E. Quinn, and Thomas X. Grasso, *Enterprising Waters: The History and Art of New York's Erie Canal* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020). ↑

12 Rotival to Wilson, 17 July 1961; Mark H. Rose and Raymond Mohl, *Interstate Highway Politics and Policy since 1939*, 3rd ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2012), 18. ↑

13 Hein, "Maurice Rotival," 339, 330, respectively. Hein relates Rotival's diagramming to nineteenth-century German bureaucratic zoning maps and English social cartography. See also Ola Söderström, "Paper Cities: Visual Thinking in Urban Planning," *Ecumene* 3, no. 3 (July 1996): 249–81. ↑

14 Sean Ryan, "Planners See Boundless Future for City, 'Crossroads of Empire,'" *Albany Times-Union*, 6 March 1962, clipping in Box 77, Rotival Papers. ↑

15 Jean Gottmann, *Megalopolis: The Urbanized Northeastern Seaboard of the United States* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1961). ↑

16 Commission on the Capital City, *Interim Report*, 51. ↑

17 Bill Angus, *A History of Crossroads in Early Modern Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 5–6. ↑

18 Commission on the Capital City, *Interim Report*, 52. ↑

19 Commission on the Capital City, *Interim Report*, 8. ↑

20 Lewis Mumford, "A New Regional Plan to Arrest Megalopolis," *Architectural Record* 137 (March 1965): 150. ↑

21 Victoria Newhouse, *Wallace K. Harrison, Architect* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), 245. See also note 2 above and William Kennedy, "The South Mall: Everything Everybody Ever Wanted," *O Albany! Improbable City of Political Wizards,*

Fearless Ethnics, Spectacular Aristocrats, Splendid Nobodies, and Underrated Scoundrels (New York: Viking, 1985), 304–24. ↑