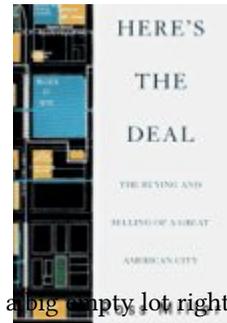


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ross Miller. *Here's The Deal: The Buying and Selling of a Great American City*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996. 316 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-394-58999-2.

Reviewed by Harvey M. Choldin (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign)
Published on H-Urban (February, 1997)



The Book's Author: Ross Miller is professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Connecticut. Author of *American Apocalypse: The Great Fire and the Myth of Chicago*, he is a former contributing editor of *Progressive Architecture*. While he was researching *Here's the Deal*, he was scholar-in-residence at the Chicago Institute for Architecture and Urbanism.

The Central Thesis: Miller's story is simultaneously simple and complex. The simple version begins around 1967, when Chicago's Mayor Richard J. Daley resolved to redevelop a large chunk of the Loop as an urban renewal project: to demolish dozens of mostly obsolete, small and medium-sized office buildings with stores at the ground level and replace them with something more grand. Presumably, redevelopment would yield impressive spaces and structures, enhance downtown activity and vitality and generate additional tax revenue for the city. Represented by a group of underlings, the mayor works with a series of developers who want to make a killing on this urban renewal.

The author focuses on one block, known officially as Block 37, which was chosen to become the cornerstone for redevelopment of an entire sector of the CBD, known as North Loop. Over the course of years, a number of developers, collaborating with city hall insiders, attempted to make plans for the area and to bring together major investors. Developers engaged architects who prepared grandiose plans for the North Loop, calling for new large hotels, theaters, commercial and governmental office buildings, shopping malls, and the like. Eventually all of these plans failed because none of the major investors actually invested or built anything. Nonetheless, the city acquired and condemned the buildings on Block 37; owners were forced to sell to the city, which tore down their

buildings. The city wound up with a big empty lot right at its very heart.

The complex version is, of course, much more interesting. Miller introduces the reader to the intricacies of politics and investment and their unique combinations in Chicago. He explains special concepts, such as the "pure deal," defined as "the highly ritualized *quid pro quo* of power sharing [which] worked not on muscle, like some of the old politics, but purely on mutual advantage..." (p. 58). Indeed, one of the author's consistent tasks is to reveal the ways in which each of the central actors stands to profit by his participation in the redevelopment process. Another theme that runs through the entire story is that city planning is managed, financed, and controlled by the developers. Planners in city hall are completely powerless to effect any of the projected multi-million dollar redevelopment of the North Loop. Miller's story extends over the terms of five different Chicago mayors, but none of them objects to having a planning process located in the private sector.

The detailed version brings in dozen of genuine Chicago actors. Some, like Mayor Richard J. Daley, architect Helmut Jahn, and especially developer Arthur Rubloff, are colorful characters. Others are not particularly colorful, but they are central to the machinations at the center of the story. The strength of the book lies in the detailed portraits of the dozens of actors along with close description of the deal-making process, step by detailed step.

Consider two central figures, as examples. Arthur Rubloff was an immigrant Jew whose life typified the rags-to-riches legend. Through cleverness and audacity, by the 1950s he became one of Chicago's largest real estate developers. By dint of his signs and posters, his

name was ubiquitous throughout the center of Chicago. He was a self-important, pompous dandy—far from Daley’s unpolished style. Nonetheless, Rubloff cut himself in on this redevelopment action. He saw major opportunities in the area that Daley wanted to redevelop and he appointed himself to be the planner—and dealmaker—for the North Loop. One of Rubloff’s major initiatives was to hire an architect who created development plans and designs. Having done so, Rubloff pre-empted the city’s feeble planning department, which had to call him to learn the plan. Eventually, however, Arthur Rubloff lost his grasp on the redevelopment, only to be replaced by other movers and shakers.

Another central actor was Miles Berger, a private-sector real estate appraisal and taxation expert. Remaining comfortably behind the scenes, Berger was a central and powerful actor. He knew the nitty-gritty of real estate—“zoning, appraisal, real estate and taxes”—but he was also well-connected in city hall. It was he who determined how the old parcels would be valued and acquired.

Miller tells this story extremely well. *Here’s the Deal* is heavily documented and filled with interesting detail. The reader cannot fail to be convinced that things happened as Miller said they did. This book represents a valuable addition to the long and rich social science literature on the workings of Chicago as a political system. *Here’s the Deal* is less theoretical than many of the tomes in this literature, but it is very rich and deep in data and description.

I have only two complaints with this book. One is stylistic and the other pertains to organization. Although the book is for the most part a good read, at times it seems that the author is trying too hard to write in a novelistic style and, at several points, he repeats himself. My organizational complaint pertains to the presentation of a section of fundamental prehistory in the book’s final chapter. At this point, approaching the end of the book, the reader has read a couple of hundred pages of a story that began in 1967. All of a sudden, the author presents twenty pages of prehistory. Surely we readers would have been better served by an outline that gave us this background when we needed it, closer to the beginning.

The Methodology: Miller combines two research methods: archival history and intensive retrospective interviews. He makes wonderful use of sources. The author developed great access; he got into several crucial archives, some of which appear to be highly confidential. He also conducted long, intensive interviews with men who participated in the process, some of them well-known figures, others unknown to the public. Miller must be a masterful interviewer; as one of the blurbs says, “Why they all told all, utterly escapes me.” The book is filled with copious detail to support the story; it also presents numerous maps, diagrams, and photographs that aid the reader.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact h-net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Harvey M. Choldin. Review of Miller, Ross, *Here’s The Deal: The Buying and Selling of a Great American City*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. February, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=846>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.