The road west to Dodger Stadium began with Walter O’Malley’s birth in New York City on October 9, 1903. The son of a Democratic politician who served as the city’s commissioner of public markets in the 1920s, O’Malley attended the University of Pennsylvania and Columbia and Fordham Law Schools, graduating from Fordham in 1930. Entering the world of law, business, and politics at the height of the Great Depression, the young O’Malley was forced to live by his wits.

He soon established connections in the Tammany Hall Democratic Party organization in which his father had served. Despite the ascendancy of reform mayor Fiorello La Guardia, a staunch foe of Tammany Hall, a potent machine culture with a distinct Catholic influence still existed in 1930s-era New York. The astute, gregarious, and Irish Catholic O’Malley thrived in it, building a successful law practice around corporate reorganizations and bankruptcy, two of the few growth areas in commercial law during those economically difficult times. But O’Malley wanted more than a career spent working for others as a respected and well-compensated attorney. Only business and entrepreneurship could offer the independence and control over his own destiny that he sought. O’Malley invested in the New York Subways Advertising Company, in which he became the largest single stockholder,
and produced a popular legal guide and register for building projects.\(^1\)

O’Malley would have remained a prosperous commercial lawyer with a midsized law firm and a happy family life in Brooklyn and Amityville, Long Island, if not for a beleaguered and debt-ridden National League baseball team named the Brooklyn Dodgers. In 1913, the team’s half owner and chief operating officer, Charles Ebbets, opened his eponymously named ballpark in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn.\(^2\) Ebbets Field was the state of the art for its time, featuring steel grandstands and an upper deck. But the cost of constructing the ballpark forced Ebbets to sell a half interest in the Dodgers to two building contractors, Edward and Steven McKeever.

The team enjoyed success in Ebbets Field’s early years, winning National League pennants in 1916 and 1920, but declined thereafter. By the 1930s, with Ebbets and Edward McKeever dead, debts accumulating, and Ebbets Field itself deteriorating, the Dodgers had become the laughingstock of baseball. Known as the “Daffiness Boys,” the team’s consistent second-division finishes were punctuated with farcical occurrences such as three men on a base simultaneously and an outfielder hit on the head by a fly ball. Attendance shrank and the virtually bankrupt team was taken over by its major creditor, the Brooklyn Trust Company, which held the shares belonging to the Ebbets and Edward McKeever estates as collateral for its unpaid loans.\(^3\)

Brooklyn Trust was a client of O’Malley’s law firm, and bank president George McLaughlin asked him to organize the team’s debt structure and corporate management. In 1943, O’Malley began serving as the Dodgers’ general counsel. From there, it was a short step to buying part of the team, which he did in 1944 in partnership with Dodger president and general manager Branch Rickey. By the next year O’Malley, along with Rickey and pharmaceutical magnate John L. Smith, owned 75 percent of the Dodgers, in equal shares, with an option for a partner to match any outside bid for the purchase of a share. O’Malley was now in the baseball business.\(^4\)
For O’Malley, who lacked the independent wealth of John L. Smith, baseball was truly a business. Unlike with other major league team owners, the team was his primary source of income. This view of baseball as a business venture and not an avocation, hobby, or public service would govern O’Malley’s conduct as a team owner for the rest of his career.

The idea of the national pastime as a bottom-line affair ran counter to every received myth about it. According to this nostalgic and sentimental tale, players played for the love of the game and its American spirit of competition and fair play. Owners operated teams to bring the sport to the fans; profits, if they came, were only an incidental consideration. But O’Malley was a businessman, not a dilettante sportsman. Although he had loved the game from his childhood days—ironically, as a New York Giants fan—he understood that it was governed by the classic rules of capitalism: overhead, investment, payroll, profit, and loss. Every other baseball team owner understood this as well, of course, but given their independent wealth, they could pretend otherwise or at least avoid the subject. O’Malley, by necessity, confronted it head-on. This did not help him with New York’s sports media, who were perhaps the most active abettors of the for-the-love-of-the-game myth.

It also hurt his public image in comparison to that of his partner, Branch Rickey, who, despite his prowess as a nickel-squeezer, had successfully sold himself as a true baseball man, with goals loftier than merely improving his team’s balance sheet. Rickey was a devout Methodist from Ohio. He had spent two decades running the St. Louis Cardinals organization, where he developed the game’s first farm system as a source of major league talent, before joining the Dodgers as general manager in 1942. The avuncular Rickey viewed himself as something of a moral philosopher as well as a talent evaluator and deal maker, expounding on baseball’s role in instilling American values of hard work and team play and advising young players that marriage would help their careers by stabilizing their personal lives. Rickey was also of course a civil rights pioneer, bringing Jackie Robinson to the Dodgers in 1947 with the approval of O’Malley and Smith.
CHAPTER 1

Rickey’s public pose as a teacher, sage, and social visionary almost inevitably brought him into conflict with the more practically minded O’Malley. There were arguments over spending, as when Rickey’s plan to invest in a Brooklyn Dodgers professional football team went awry and cost the partnership hundreds of thousands of dollars. There were also clashes of a more personal nature, involving culture, religion, and outlook. Rickey was a midwestern Protestant, O’Malley an urban Catholic. Rickey wore his religious values on his sleeve, to the point of refusing to attend games on Sundays. O’Malley’s faith was expressed in less public ways, and he was discomfited by what he considered Rickey’s sanctimony. Rickey, in turn, was discomfited by O’Malley’s apparent ease in the milieu of Democratic Party machine politics, where contacts and friends in high places could open doors in ways that merely being in the right could not. But what may have doomed their working relationship was not their differences but their similarities. Each desired to be his own boss. Rickey had worked for many years under Cardinals ownership, not always comfortably, and had come to Brooklyn largely for the opportunity to run the entire organization. Moving up the ladder to partial team ownership, he believed, would solidify his management position.

But O’Malley had even less experience working for others than did Rickey, and he was just as determined to place his own stamp on the Dodgers. He had not come up in the game, as Rickey had, but O’Malley had built a legal and business career largely on his own and believed he had the ability to shape the direction of the franchise. He had in particular decided on the necessity of replacing Ebbets Field, a project in which Rickey was less interested.

By the late 1940s, the park was deteriorating physically. It featured dirty bathrooms, narrow aisles, rusting pillars, and a general down-at-the-heels raffishness that charmed only those who did not patronize it regularly. Since it had been constructed to fit the contours of an already existing city block, the stadium lacked symmetry, with a deep left field topped by double-decked grandstands and a shorter right field with a thirty-eight-foot fence that played havoc with fly balls. Ticket sellers and ushers were notoriously surly, often behaving like panhandlers. Seats did not always
face home plate, creating less-than-optimal sightlines. Poles also blocked many views. The park was built from ground level up, forcing upper-deck fans to walk up ramps to their seats.

Ebbets Field was also geographically inconvenient. No highway ran near it. Automobile parking was challenging, with only 700-odd spaces available. Even subway service was not as accessible as it could be, with the nearest line stopping four blocks from the ballpark. Ebbets Field held only 32,000 spectators, making it one of the smallest parks in the major leagues and particularly size-challenged in comparison with the homes of the Dodgers’ New York City rivals, the Giants (Polo Grounds, capacity 55,000) and Yankees (Yankee Stadium, capacity 67,000). Almost from the moment he bought an interest in the Dodgers, it was clear to O’Malley that Ebbets Field had to be replaced. As early as 1946, he was writing to architect-engineer Emil Praeger—who would later design Dodger Stadium—requesting advice about “enlarging or replacing our present stadium.”12 In 1948, O’Malley began what would become a ten-year campaign for a new facility in Brooklyn, one that would lead circuitously and controversially to Los Angeles and Chavez Ravine.

The atmosphere was tense between O’Malley and Rickey by 1950, when the latter’s contract as Dodger general manager came up for renewal. After John L. Smith’s death from cancer that year, his widow inherited his partnership share and aligned herself with O’Malley. When it became clear to Rickey that he would be reduced to a partnership without power, he decided to make the best deal possible. Taking advantage of O’Malley’s desire to control the club, Rickey solicited wealthy real estate man William Zeckendorf to bid on his share of the team, knowing O’Malley would be forced to match it. Zeckendorf’s bid, never intended to be a serious one, was $1 million, almost three times what Rickey had originally paid for his share.13 O’Malley would not forgive Rickey for this maneuver. But if he wanted the Dodgers, he would have to come up with the money. Liquidating some of his outside business investments to raise capital, he did so.14 At an October 26, 1950, press conference, Walter O’Malley was introduced as the new president of the Brooklyn Dodgers. Rickey, about to

For general queries, contact webmaster@press.princeton.edu
join the Pittsburgh Pirates as their general manager, may have had O’Malley’s money, but O’Malley had his team.15

O’Malley never pretended to know the intricacies of scouting, trades, the minor leagues, and the everyday work of assembling a winning on-field product. So, unlike Rickey, he delegated these functions to others. Veteran baseball man Emil “Buzzie” Bavasi was made responsible for major league operations as the Dodgers’ general manager. Another astute talent evaluator, Fresco Thompson, was placed in charge of scouting and minor league development. Both men spent more than a quarter century in the Dodger organization. Their long tenures exemplified O’Malley’s management style, which emphasized identifying talented personnel and giving them the independence to do their jobs over the long term, riding out ups and downs in the interest of stability and loyalty. During the almost thirty years he controlled the Dodgers, O’Malley employed only three general managers and three field managers. One of the managers, Walter Alston, served for twenty-three years on a series of one-year contracts. Vin Scully, the Dodgers’ lead radio announcer, worked for the team all but one year of O’Malley’s tenure as controlling owner.16

Organizational continuity translated into on-field success. During the first seven years of O’Malley’s controlling ownership, all in Brooklyn, the Dodgers won four National League pennants (losing another in a playoff), as well as the franchise’s only New York World Series.17 The Dodger players, later immortalized as “the Boys of Summer” by the author Roger Kahn, were some of the most beloved athletes in New York City sports history, replete with affectionate nicknames—Pee Wee (shortstop Harold Reese), Campy (catcher Roy Campanella), Duke (center fielder Edwin Snider), and Oisk (pitcher Carl Erskine). The presence of Jackie Robinson gave the team an air of historic gravitas. Many baseball fans considered the Dodgers more compelling as losers than the all-conquering Yankees were as perennial winners.

The Brooklyn Dodgers, indeed, were the people’s team of New York. The roots of its fan base were proudly and consciously in the city’s working class. The Dodgers’ tumbledown ballpark in an off-the-beaten-path section of an off-the-beaten-path borough
stood in contrast to monumental Yankee Stadium, home of champions, and even to the Giants’ Polo Grounds, which was located in Manhattan, the center of the American sports universe.

The Yankees were a patrician team, drawing fans from the city’s professional and business classes and the wealthy suburbs. Yankee fans viewed their team as a proprietary trust, expecting to win the World Series each and every year. When they did—one out of every two years between 1923 and 1962—they were greeted not with rapture but smug satisfaction. “Rooting for the Yankees,” quipped an observer in the 1950s, “is like rooting for U.S. Steel.”

The Giants and their fans also harbored lordly attitudes, especially toward their hometown National League rivals. They viewed the Dodgers as akin to country cousins desperately seeking to climb the social ladder. In the early decades of the twentieth century, before the rise of the Yankees, the Giants had dominated the New York sporting scene; the Yankees, in fact, had been their tenants at the Polo Grounds before opening their own stadium in 1923. Managed by the legendary John McGraw, the Giants were the toast of Manhattan’s “smart set,” a Broadway team that in the 1920s attracted the likes of New York’s dapper mayor, “Gentleman Jimmy” Walker.

Even after McGraw’s retirement in 1932, the Giants’ mystique continued, with future Hall of Famers Bill Terry, Mel Ott, and Carl Hubbell leading the team to three National League pennants and one world championship in the 1930s. During this time, the Dodgers were largely irrelevant on the field and in the city’s sports culture. When asked about the Dodgers’ chances before the 1934 season, Terry replied sardonically, “Are they still in the National League?” Although the Dodgers improved in the 1940s, the Giants continued to view them as upstarts who never could win the big one. The Dodgers’ record of late-season futility appeared to bear this out. Between 1946 and 1954, the Dodgers featured four future Hall of Famers and their players earned ten All Star team selections. Yet during that period, they lost the National League pennant to the St. Louis Cardinals in a playoff in 1946; lost to the Yankees in the seventh and deciding game of the World Series in 1947; lost to the Yankees in five games in the World Series...
of 1949; lost the pennant to the Philadelphia Phillies on the last day of the 1950 season; lost the 1952 and 1953 World Series to the Yankees in seven and six games, respectively; and lost a pennant race to the Giants in 1954.

Worst of all was 1951. That year, the Dodgers led the Giants by a seemingly insurmountable thirteen games in mid-August, only to see the Giants win thirty-seven of their forty-four remaining games to overtake them. The teams were tied on the last day of the regular season; a two-out-of-three-game playoff would decide the pennant. The Giants took game one and the Dodgers game two. The champion would be crowned on October 3, 1951, at the Polo Grounds.

The Dodgers took a 4–1 lead into the bottom of the ninth. Three outs from the pennant, the unimaginable occurred. A lead-off single for the Giants and, after an out, another single and a double made the score 4–2 with runners on second and third. A pitching change brought in Ralph Branca—number 13—for the Dodgers. Giant third baseman Bobby Thomson hit Branca’s second pitch on a low line drive into the left field seats for a pennant-clinching three-run homer, a blow that traveled into history as “the shot heard round the world.” It was somehow fitting that the Brooklyn Dodgers would be on the losing end of what is generally considered to be the most dramatic moment in baseball history. It was especially humiliating to fall to the team’s bitter interleague competitors.

Neither the Dodger players nor their fans knew at the time that the Giants had been surreptitiously using a telescope mounted in their center-field clubhouse at the Polo Grounds to steal signs from opposing catchers, passing them along to Giant batters through a series of buzzers and signals. The advance knowledge afforded by this subterfuge gave the Giants a huge advantage when playing at home, and their 24–6 record at the Polo Grounds after the telescope began to be used testifies to its value. For the Brooklyn Dodgers, the perpetual team of the underdog and of working-class New York, it seemed always to end this way—with a heartbreaking defeat at the hands of one of the other two local teams. As the 1955 season began, the Dodgers’ recent history included five
World Series defeats at the hands of the Yankees and two losses to the Giants for the National League pennant.

That history made 1955 one of the most satisfying and redemptive seasons any sports team had experienced. After winning the pennant easily, the Dodgers squared off against the Yankees in the World Series for the third time in four years. With the Dodgers defeated in the first two games, it appeared that history would repeat itself yet again. But the Dodgers stormed back to win the Series in seven games. When left-hander Johnny Podres recorded the last out in a 2–0 complete-game shutout at Yankee Stadium on October 4, 1955, the Brooklyn Dodgers were world champions at last. In Brooklyn that night, the atmosphere rivaled that of V-E Day ten years earlier, as long-suffering fans thronged in the streets throwing confetti and banging pots and pans. “Who’s a Bum!” crowed the front-page headline of New York’s working-class newspaper, the Daily News, above a cartoon image of the Dodgers’ mythical mascot, the Bum—a disheveled, virtually toothless hobo—sporting an ear-to-ear grin.22

Even this moment of catharsis was short-lived, as events surrounding the Dodgers’ impending move began to crowd out lingering good feelings from the 1955 championship. A loss to the Yankees in the 1956 World Series appeared to bring a more familiar order to the New York baseball universe. Still, the bond between the Brooklyn Dodgers and their fans was a uniquely deep one, rooted in the ethnic neighborhoods of the borough where many Dodger players made their homes and in the working-class culture of the city. In addition, with six African American players on their roster by 1957—the Yankees had taken until 1955 to grudgingly integrate their squad—the Dodgers were the major league team most closely associated with racial egalitarianism. New York was a city of workers in the 1950s. The Brooklyn Dodgers were their team.

But while the Yankees were the team of the suites and the Dodgers that of the streets, this did not always translate into packed houses at Ebbets Field. Only during the first two years of O’Malley’s Brooklyn ownership, 1951 and 1952, did the Dodgers lead the National League in home attendance; they were second three times
and fourth and fifth the other two years.\textsuperscript{23} In no year did they come close to surpassing the Yankees, who enjoyed the advantage of a more easily accessible stadium with more than twice as many seats as Ebbets Field.

Revenues from over-the-air television broadcasts of Dodger games enabled O’Malley to turn profits each year he was in Brooklyn, but an ominous threat appeared on the horizon in 1953. That year, the moribund Boston Braves became the first major league baseball franchise to move in over half a century, shifting to Milwaukee, a baseball-starved city that gave them a rapturous welcome. The Milwaukee Braves led the major leagues in attendance every year from 1953 to 1957, outdrawing even the Yankees despite playing in a ballpark with almost 25,000 fewer seats.\textsuperscript{24}
During that period, the Braves attracted almost twice the number of home fans as the Dodgers.25

The terms of the stadium deal the Braves received when they relocated to Milwaukee deeply concerned O’Malley. Milwaukee County Stadium was a 43,000-seat facility with approximately 11,000 more seats than Ebbets Field, giving the Braves a built-in advantage in ticket income. More fans in the stands meant more money spent on concessions, almost all of which also went into the Braves’ coffers.26 The Braves paid a total rental of $250,000 for 1953 and 1954.27 County Stadium was directly accessible from a major highway and boasted a 10,000-space on-site parking lot.28 The Braves also adopted a policy of not televising any of their games, which further stimulated attendance by making it necessary to go to County Stadium in order to see Milwaukee’s favorite team.
CHAPTER 1

The Braves' enormous financial success at County Stadium accentuated Ebbets Field's shortcomings. Looking uneasily to the future, O'Malley envisioned a time when the Braves would use their advantages in attendance and revenue to bury the Dodgers competitively. With the free market still governing player signings, the Braves could outbid the Dodgers for the best young prospects. They could afford to hire the best scouts and front office personnel. They could spend whatever was necessary—and what the Dodgers could not afford to spend—to bring in the best managers and coaches at both the major and minor league levels. This increased spending would eventually allow the Braves to overtake the Dodgers on the field, using the revenue from multiple pennants and world championships to further consign the Brooklyn team to second-place status or worse.

From his vantage point at Ebbets Field, O'Malley could see this nightmarish scenario taking shape year by year. The Braves increased their home attendance by 600 percent in 1953 after they moved to Milwaukee. They improved their won-loss record from 64–89 (seventh place) in 1952, their last year in Boston, to 92–62 (second place) the next year in Milwaukee. They followed with a third-place finish in 1954 (85–69) that left them three games behind the Dodgers and second place in 1955 (85–69). They lost the pennant to the Dodgers on the last day of the regular season in 1956 (92–62). In 1957, the Braves bested the Dodgers by eleven games in winning the National League pennant (95–69) and defeated the Yankees to win the World Series. Thanks to a new stadium on favorable rental terms in a new city desperate for major league baseball, the Braves had gone from next-to-last place and an average of 3,650 fans per home game to a world championship and baseball's best attendance in the space of five years. Even before that 1957 World Series, O'Malley could see the challenges facing him. He now viewed a new Brooklyn stadium as a matter of competitive survival.

It was clear that any road to that new stadium would run through the good offices of Robert Moses, who in 1950s New York City determined what would be built, who would build it, and where it would be built. Moses had famously combined a series
of appointive administrative positions heading public authorities and agencies with the power to issue bonds, collect revenues, condemn and sell land, and award construction contracts. Moses had never won an election on his own. In his only run for public office, in the 1934 New York governor's race, he had been defeated decisively. But the wily Moses packaged his bureaucratic positions—by the 1950s he served simultaneously as chairman of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, the New York City Parks Commissioner, the New York State Power Commission chairman, and the New York City coordinator of construction—into a position of command and influence that outweighed that of any elected official. Governors, senators, and mayors bent to his will.

Perhaps Moses's most potent source of power in the 1950s came from his control of the administration of what was known as Title I of the Federal Housing Act of 1949. Under Title I, local governments would use federal funds to condemn blighted or slum properties, then sell the land at a subsidized price to private developers for projects that would serve or relate to a public purpose or use, such as schools, hospitals, roads, parks, or housing. Residents of these areas, often members of minority groups, would, at least theoretically, be relocated to better accommodations elsewhere.

As New York City's Title I coordinator, Moses had almost untrammeled power to greenlight a project. This enabled him to build a personal machine of banks, construction firms, architects, and real estate firms beholden to him for business and referrals. While not a grasper himself, Moses still fell prey to the all-too-human impulse to reward friends and allies. He developed a coterie of favored individuals and entities to serve his interests and receive his largesse. Often these friends of Bob Moses reflected his own culture and outlook, which were very much in the good-government mode of public-service-oriented reformers. Moses was born Jewish but identified as an Anglo-Saxon Protestant. He had fought his earliest political battles against a venal Tammany Hall Democratic machine that pursued its own narrowly selfish goals without regard for the public good. Moses never lost his
distaste for those he considered vulgar and grasping Tammany politicians. While there is no indication that Moses was bigoted against Irish Catholics, it was well known that the Tammany machine was dominated by them.

It was thus almost predictable that Walter O’Malley would have a great deal of trouble convincing Robert Moses to help him build a new stadium for the Brooklyn Dodgers. O’Malley was an outsider to Moses, not part of his club of friendly colleagues. O’Malley was an Irish Catholic. He had connections to Tammany, both through his father and via the contacts he had established over the course of his years as a local attorney and businessman. Moses, moreover, was notoriously uninterested in spectator sports. He considered them a waste of time, preferring more active and participatory forms of recreation such as swimming.

Perhaps most important, Moses viewed a privately owned baseball stadium as just that—a private enterprise—and thus inappropriate for a Title I project that would advance a public purpose. By the early 1950s, O’Malley had decided on a parcel of land at the intersection of Atlantic and Flatbush Avenues near downtown Brooklyn, about two miles from Ebbets Field, as the site of his proposed new ballpark. The location was perfect for mass transit. The Brooklyn terminal of the Long Island Railroad was under the street, and nine subway lines stopped there. O’Malley planned to construct the stadium at his own expense, but he clearly would not be able to afford the cost of acquiring the land. Unlike Charles Ebbets, who had been able to buy up the parcels he needed without letting slip his purposes, O’Malley had already tipped his hand about his desire to locate the new Dodger stadium on the Atlantic-Flatbush properties. Only Robert Moses, through the use of Title I condemnation, could get him the land he needed at a price he could even remotely afford. There were perhaps ten men in New York City at the time with the financial resources to purchase the entire Atlantic-Flatbush property out of their own pockets, and O’Malley was not one of them. Even a bank would not have been willing to lend him the sum necessary to purchase the land. But from the beginning of their negotiations in 1953,
Moses was implacable: the stadium was a private project, not a public one, and there would be no Title I funding for it.

O’Malley’s need for Moses’s support put him in the unaccustomed position of a supplicant. For a man who prided himself on being the master of his own destiny, this was undoubtedly difficult. O’Malley controlled the Dodgers, but not the surrounding political environment, in which Moses stood preeminent. And because Moses disdained the idea that a privately owned ballpark constituted a public purpose and also disdained the civic value of baseball itself, the result was a quest for a new Dodger home in Brooklyn that at times seemed close enough to touch but was ultimately out of reach. “We tried for ten long years to acquire land, which we were going to pay for to build a stadium which we were going to pay for,” O’Malley recalled ruefully years later, “all without success.”

Further complicating O’Malley’s stadium plans was the inhospitable political culture of 1950s-era New York City. Beginning in the New Deal years of the Fiorello La Guardia mayoral administration, the city’s public sector had expanded to become a driving force in the municipal economy. By the 1950s, New York had more government jobs than any other American city except Washington, D.C. Along with confidence in the efficacy of public authority to govern and manage came ambivalence toward private enterprise and those who engaged in it. Making matters worse for O’Malley was his application of business principles to the management of a baseball club that was perceived by its fans and by the media as constituting a public trust.

Romanticized notions of baseball as a pristine American sport notwithstanding, O’Malley’s business-oriented approach to the game made sense. Indeed, it could be argued that it offered more benefits to Dodger supporters than one that was less profit-driven and more tied to emotion. Measured by results on the field, O’Malley delivered value for the fan dollar and outperformed the more popular baseball men who preceded him as Dodger president. Branch Rickey won two National League pennants during his time in Brooklyn (1942–50) and Larry MacPhail (1938–42)
one. O’Malley won four in only seven years at the helm in Brooklyn, adding the franchise’s first world championship in 1955. His understanding that the Dodgers had to be run as a business was a major contribution to that success, as well as an acknowledgment of financial and competitive reality. But Robert Moses, who invariably professed to represent the public against the interests of business and capital, could leverage economic antipathies dating back to at least the New Deal era to deny O’Malley the Atlantic-Flatbush site for his stadium. Moses’s narrow understanding of the idea of a public use or purpose ran parallel to that of the city’s political culture. The fact that O’Malley stood to gain financially from a new Brooklyn stadium loomed large enough to outweigh the public benefits—taxes, jobs, entertainment, infrastructure—that could accrue from it.

After Moses’s Title I rebuff, O’Malley and New York city and state officials tried another tack in 1956 with the creation of the Brooklyn Sports Center Authority as an alternative means of financing a new stadium. Approved by Governor Averell Harriman and nominally supported by New York City mayor Robert Wagner and Brooklyn borough president John Cashmore, the authority would conduct an engineering and architectural study of the Atlantic-Flatbush property, determine the cost and feasibility of constructing a stadium there, and issue bonds in order to finance it. But Moses hampered the work of the authority board and made sure that it received minimal funding. He even influenced the content of the engineering report, which estimated the cost of land acquisition and stadium construction at $20 million and annual bond interest at $2.5 million, both unaffordable. Moses further dampened enthusiasm by stating unequivocally that the authority bonds were unsalable. As the city’s most prominent marketer of municipal bonds through his Title I and other building projects, Moses was considered the authoritative voice on the subject. By the summer of 1957 the Sports Center Authority plan had petered out.

Moses also shot down a separate proposal by the New York City Corporation Counsel to condemn the Atlantic-Flatbush properties for the stadium as a slum area, employing his familiar lack-
of-public-purpose grounds. Moses’s best offer to O’Malley was a municipally constructed stadium in the Flushing Meadows section of Queens near the site of the 1939 World’s Fair, in which the Dodgers would be tenants. O’Malley visited the area and engaged in some preliminary niceties with Moses, but it was clear that he had no interest in a ballpark he would not own and which would not even be located in Brooklyn. If he had to leave Brooklyn, O’Malley averred, it would not matter if he was “five miles or 3000 miles” away.39

By 1957, the possibility of being three thousand miles away from Brooklyn was a very real one, thanks to the efforts of two politicians from Los Angeles, California, whose differing political allegiances did not stand in the way of a common vision for their city. Norris Poulson, a Republican former congressman who had been elected mayor in 1953, represented “Downtown,” the city’s power center of corporate, financial, media, retail, and real estate interests. Downtown leaders desired a major league baseball team both as a symbolic marker for Los Angeles’s status as a growth-oriented, world-class metropolis and as a means of revitalizing downtown itself, which was run-down in areas and lacked the cultural and leisure resources of other notable American cities.

Rosalind Wyman, a liberal Democrat from the “Westside,” a center for the city’s entertainment, building and loan, construction, and sportswear industries, with a sizable Jewish population, had been elected to the City Council, also in 1953, at the age of twenty-two. Wyman was the youngest member in that body’s history and its first woman in almost forty years. One of Wyman’s campaign planks had been bringing major league baseball to Los Angeles. Once in office, she made this a top priority. Like Poulson, Wyman envisioned a civic infrastructure for Los Angeles that would complement and reinforce its post–World War II economic and demographic expansion. That Poulson and Wyman, a business Republican and a labor Democrat, could unite in the effort to attract a major league team to Los Angeles spoke to their common agenda of modernization and growth for a city that, in their view, required civic institutions that would match its power and influence. Another point of agreement between the two may also
have been of significance: unlike Robert Moses, Wyman and Poulson were both baseball fans.

O’Malley’s first contact with Los Angeles came in 1955, when Wyman attempted to arrange a meeting with the Dodger owner in New York. O’Malley, who was still hopeful he could reach an accommodation with Moses, told her he was happy in his home city. Wyman left without seeing him. In October 1956, O’Malley and the Dodgers stopped off in Los Angeles on their way to visit Japan after the World Series. County supervisor Kenneth Hahn sought to interest O’Malley in a move to Los Angeles, but the Dodger owner instead held a press conference at which he reiterated his intention to remain in New York and expressed confidence in the progress of negotiations for a new Brooklyn stadium. But by the next year, O’Malley was frustrated enough with the pace of those negotiations to agree to see a delegation of Los Angeles city officials during the Dodgers’ 1957 spring training camp at Vero Beach, Florida. There O’Malley sketched out what it would take to get him to move west. He asked for what New York had thus far refused to offer: affordable land upon which to construct his own stadium.

O’Malley’s acquisition in February 1957 of Los Angeles’s Wrigley Field from the Chicago Cubs in a minor league affiliate trade gave him a local property that could be used as consideration for any land deal. It now became a race to the finish for both Los Angeles and New York, as O’Malley negotiated with both simultaneously. It was clear that the city offering the land O’Malley desired would win the Dodgers. O’Malley’s heart was with New York. He had built his life and career in the city and had the native New Yorker’s outsized pride in it. O’Malley was almost completely unfamiliar with Los Angeles except as a potential business market. But he would go with the first city that met his terms. In May 1957, he flew to Los Angeles for more discussions. During a helicopter ride over the city in search of possible stadium sites, O’Malley observed a large expanse of sparsely occupied land close to downtown. It was known as Chavez Ravine, and he decided almost immediately it was where he wanted to build his Los Angeles ballpark.
O’Malley was not aware of the Ravine’s history. Home to a tightly knit, traditional Mexican American community of some twelve hundred families, it had passed the first half of the twentieth century largely ignored by the rest of Los Angeles, despite its location about a mile from City Hall and the downtown area. Its isolation ended in 1949, when it was designated as the site of a public housing project and all but a handful of its residents removed and dispersed. But after a Red scare–influenced campaign against the housing project as “socialistic,” the newly inaugurated mayor, Poulson, canceled it in 1953, leaving the Ravine empty except for a small number of families who refused to leave. The city of Los Angeles acquired the property from the federal government in 1955. It had not decided on a use for the land when O’Malley flew over it in May 1957.

As the summer of 1957 proceeded, events began to rush to a conclusion. In June, O’Malley was called to testify before the U.S. House of Representatives Judiciary Committee’s Antimonopoly Subcommittee, which was considering challenges to major league baseball’s exemption from antitrust laws. Under sharp questioning from the committee chair, Representative Emanuel Celler of

Brooklyn, O’Malley refused to say whether his team would still be in New York in 1958, although he reemphasized his intention to build a new Brooklyn ballpark at his own expense. O’Malley raised Celler’s ire when he expressed satisfaction at the Dodgers’ financial success. Hearing this violation of the sport’s unwritten taboo against public references to baseball as a business, an angry Celler jeered at O’Malley: “I glory in your profits. . . . I hope you make twice as much next year.” The hearings ended with baseball’s antitrust exemption intact but even more uncertainty about O’Malley’s intentions.

It is probable that at this point O’Malley himself did not know. The chances were now greater that Los Angeles would offer him the deal he wanted. But if a way could be found around Moses and if the Atlantic-Flatbush land could made available at a price he could afford, he would stay in New York. His hometown was familiar territory. Los Angeles was terra incognita. To a man who wished to be in control of his surroundings, New York—if it came through—was his preferred option.

The New York option became more complicated on August 19, when the New York Giants announced they would play in San Francisco beginning in 1958. O’Malley’s role in this decision has long been the subject of debate. The Giants’ stadium situation was even worse than that of the Dodgers. The Polo Grounds were antiquated, difficult to access by automobile, and located in a deteriorating section of Harlem in Upper Manhattan. Despite featuring Willie Mays, one of the most exciting players in baseball history, the Giants drew only 629,000 fans in 1956, ranking last in the National League. Before the 1957 season, Giants owner Horace Stoneham told O’Malley that he was seriously considering moving his team to Minneapolis, where the Giants had a minor league affiliate. O’Malley urged Stoneham to reconsider and instead investigate a possible move to the West Coast, where the Giants-Dodgers rivalry might be rekindled in a new setting. This made obvious sense, and the flirtation of the two teams with San Francisco and Los Angeles proceeded on roughly parallel tracks in 1957. While O’Malley did not push Stoneham to San Francisco, he did offer advice and furnish governmental contacts that facili-
tated the consummation of the move. In contrast to Los Angeles, San Francisco agreed to construct a municipal stadium for the Giants to rent.

Stoneham’s August 19 announcement did not guarantee that the Dodgers would also move. On May 28, the National League owners had passed a resolution granting the Dodgers and Giants permission to relocate to the West Coast if they gave notice by October 1 and if they moved together. This meant that in the event O’Malley chose to remain in New York, the Giants’ move to San Francisco would likely be nullified and the team presumably transferred to the more geographically accessible Minneapolis instead. But one way or the other, the Giants were leaving New York, and this fact would alter the circumstances under which O’Malley would make his own decision to stay or remain. If he stayed in New York, he would have a monopoly on National League baseball as the only team in town. If he departed, he could employ the already existing Los Angeles–San Francisco rivalry to pick up where he had left off in New York. As he pondered his future after August 19, O’Malley could reassure himself that he would have a degree of investment protection no matter what city he chose.

But which city? O’Malley had set his own internal deadline with the sale of Ebbets Field to developer Marvin Kratter in 1956; it would belong to Kratter beginning in 1958. In 1956, the Dodgers had played seven home games in Jersey City’s Roosevelt Stadium, a not-so-subtle means of emphasizing Ebbets Field’s inadequacies. O’Malley continued the practice during the 1957 season. The pressure was now clearly on New York.

In July 1957, Los Angeles appointed Harold McClellan, a local businessman and former undersecretary of commerce in the Eisenhower administration, as its chief stadium contract negotiator. O’Malley now could bargain with a single individual who possessed the authority to speak for Los Angeles. This arrangement offered an advantage over New York, where Moses held power but was effectively refusing to negotiate with O’Malley, leaving the task to an uncoordinated group of New York officials, including Mayor Wagner, Brooklyn borough president Cashmore, city comptroller...
Lawrence Gerosa, and City Corporation counsel Peter Campbell Brown, among others.

By early September, McClellan’s offer had taken shape. Los Angeles would exchange approximately 300 acres of Chavez Ravine land for Wrigley Field. The city already owned 185 acres of this land, and promised to use its best efforts to acquire the rest for transfer to the Dodgers. The city of Los Angeles would contribute $2 million for land excavation and grading, and Los Angeles County would allocate $2.74 million from its motor vehicle fund for stadium access roads. O’Malley would build a new stadium and construct a public recreation area on a portion of the Chavez Ravine land, both at his own expense. The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors ratified the offer of access roads on September 17. The remainder of the deal would require approval by the Los Angeles City Council to become official. That body met on September 16 to consider it.

With New York seemingly out of options, a last-minute possibility emerged from an unlikely source. Nelson Rockefeller, the most well-known and politically ambitious of the dynastic family’s heirs, was considering a run for the New York State governorship in 1958. Concerned about the possibility of the Dodgers leaving town and mindful of the benefits in publicity and goodwill he would enjoy if he saved the day, Rockefeller stepped forward on September 10 with a plan to buy the Atlantic-Flatbush property after the city condemned it and lease it to the Dodgers at no cost for twenty years, after which the team would buy it. The Dodgers would build a stadium on the site with their own funds.

The estimated condemnation price of the land was $8 million. Rockefeller offered $2 million toward it. Moses and members of the city’s Board of Estimate, which was required to approve all municipal land use measures, criticized the plan, arguing that the $6 million loss New York would need to absorb on the transaction was unaffordable. Rockefeller then sweetened his offer to $3 million, but O’Malley responded that the numbers did not add up for him. After financing the new stadium himself and paying real estate taxes on it for 20 years, he would not have enough money to buy the land from Rockefeller at the end of that period.
And without the land, he would essentially be what he had resolved not to be: a tenant. Rockefeller would have to further increase his bid on the Atlantic-Flatbush property to make the transaction work. When he did not do so, the deal sank, although the chance remained that the legendarily deep-pocketed candidate-to-be could resuscitate it with a richer offer. As things stood, however, the way was clear for Los Angeles to decide if it would give O’Malley what he needed. The last Dodger home game of the 1957 season was played at Ebbets Field on September 24 in a funereal atmosphere. While no official announcement had yet been made, it was obvious that the pendulum had swung toward Los Angeles.