

Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City. *By Matthew Gandy.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002. 344 pp. Index, notes, maps, illustrations, photographs. Cloth, \$34.95. ISBN 0-262-07224-6.

Reviewed by Richard Longstreth

The city of New York has long offered fertile ground for historians. In its physical environment, cultural production, business achievement, social relations, and many other arenas, the metropolis provides a gargantuan fare of ideas, events, and trends that carry implications far beyond its five boroughs and adjacent counties. New York is, of course, a city of extremes, and a persistent tendency exists to posit phenomena that occur there as reflective of American cities or American culture more generally. Matthew Gandy avoids trumpeting that the contents of his new book on New York, *Concrete and Clay*, carry such weighty implications, but from the beginning of the text, it is hard for the reader to conceive that this was developed as merely a local study. The author has chosen five topics as the basis for his environmental history of the city from Dutch colonial times to the present. Even though some of these topics may seem rather narrow and their assemblage arbitrary at first glance, all of them afford especially poignant insights into the shaping of New York and all of them also are quite useful in considering the American urban condition—historically and currently. Together, the chapters succeed in delineating a fresh and indeed sweeping perspective of the city, not just a city.

Gandy begins with an encapsulated history of New York's water supply over the span of some four centuries, focusing on the past two hundred years. The shifts from unregulated and woefully inadequate private-sector systems, to the incremental development of a full-fledged municipal one of epic proportions, to recent conditions that challenge that system's capacity to sustain its basic objectives are examined as a means of illustrating not only the decisive impact a safe and dependable water supply has for the state of any city, but also how these changes reflect far deeper currents in American culture. He challenges a number of environmental histories that present an antiurban, anti-big government bias, arguing that a well-regulated, powerful municipal authority can be of vital service to millions of people over a substantial period of time. But if one may start to think of Gandy as an apologist for establishment decision makers, the second chapter will quickly dispel that notion. Here attention is directed to Central Park, the major prototype for the large recreation grounds created in cities across the nation from the mid-nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries. With aplomb Gandy delineates this landmark endeavor as an urban commodification of nature that constructed a landscape to be enjoyed primarily by New Yorkers

sufficiently prosperous to have leisure time and the mobility to reach its confines. Whatever the altruistic intentions of its creators, Central Park was also a product of intense real estate speculation.

The third chapter continues to address landscape development, but now in a distinctively twentieth-century form, examining the highway plans of Robert Moses from the 1930s into the 1960s. Gandy contrasts the parkways Moses created in the early part of his career, which generated widespread praise, with the high-speed expressways of later years, which became the source of intense controversy and called into question the merits of strong public-sector authority. The final two chapters explore alternatives—grassroots movements that originated in the 1960s and the 1990s. The first of these was orchestrated by the Young Lords, a group of Puerto Rican youths. Initially, their efforts were dedicated to improving the physical environment on the street and in the tenements of East Harlem, but they implied a much larger agenda of changing the lives of the impoverished, defying the established order in the process. But, as with Moses, the Young Lords changed their priorities, in their case turning from the physical environment and local issues to Puerto Rican independence, leading to a swift downfall. The final chapter addresses the current dilemma of waste disposal. While forced to set a closure date for its immense Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island, the city has proven incapable of developing adequate substitutes save costly long-distance transfer. An ad hoc coalition that, despite overwhelming odds, prevented authorities from constructing an incinerator plant in the impoverished Greenpoint–Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn underscores how effective such activist endeavors can be, but also how narrow their impact. While successful in preventing yet another environmentally intrusive function in a precinct already saturated with them, the initiative did not begin to address the fundamental problem of disposal.

There is no progress in Gandy's sequence of episodes, only challenge and change. He offers no solution either. The book's concluding paragraph opens with these words:

The contemporary juxtaposition of cities and nature has produced some powerful incongruities. . . environmentalists call for a return to cyclical patterns of resource use as part of a premodern bioregional ethic; the vast urban infrastructures built up over the modern era continue to provide material sustenance for urban society in spite of their neglect; and the historic cultures of nature serve as aesthetic enhancement for the postmodern simulacra of urban real estate. (p. 234)

The point of the book, however, is not to advance a strategy for the future, but to sharpen our understanding of difficult relationships, tangible and otherwise, that lie at the heart of the city as we know it and contribute in various ways to its intricate, sometimes inscrutable, character.

In developing his thesis, Gandy, a geographer, has drawn largely from existing scholarly work and readily available period sources. Anyone anticipating an abundance of new historical material will be disappointed. Sometimes he is careless with facts. Jones Beach, for example, was hardly intended for use by affluent New Yorkers (p. 129); quite the opposite. Lawrence Halprin is not an architect (p. 143), but one of the nation's most famous landscape architects. It was not the New York Regional Plan that was established in 1921 (p. 130), but the Regional Plan Association; the plan itself was issued in a series of volumes beginning in 1923. With the exception of a few seminal figures such as Frederick Law Olmsted or Robert Moses, there is little discussion of how individuals helped shape the events on which Gandy focuses, so the analysis tends to be somewhat abstract, a characteristic fostered by the author's propensity for well-crafted generalizations. The elite, the middle class, the disenfranchised alike are treated somewhat monolithically, without examining the myriad distinctions that exist within any such broad categorical group. Frequent reference is made to the ties between the environmental subjects of this book and economic concerns, yet the relationships are never delineated in detail. While drawbacks of this kind may frustrate historians, they should take stock in *Concrete and Clay's* underlying message, which offers a framework for significant new realms of historical inquiry.

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