the opportunity to follow her deeply into the publications and archives of individuals who have been either ignored or poorly understood by most modern students of the American land. Indeed, her analysis of land issues in the desert Southwest, on the prairies, or around the San Francisco Bay Area, for example, supplies close readings of these, and other, landscape zones. The frustration of her organization is the circuitousness of the route she maps, which brings us back repeatedly to the same people or places from differing perspectives.

Despite these repetitions, she provides a useful and comprehensive overview of the development of a conservation ethic in the United States between the Back-to-Nature movement of the late nineteenth century and the anxieties of the cold-war period. As Simo states, “the main interest, the heart of our quest, will be traces of wildness (a quality, not a terrain), along with experiences of freedom, abundance, the sense of being alive” (xiv). She emphasizes the difference between wildness and wilderness, a charged concept that emerged during this time, noting the common mistake made by those who quote Thoreau’s dictum “in wildness is the preservation of the world.”

Simo provides an excellent review of the major issues in the development of American conservation. We relearn about the divisions between John Muir and the aesthetic approach to landscape versus Gifford Pinchot and the utilitarian attitudes of forestry. The two men famously came into conflict over the Hetch Hetchy project, which proposed damming the Tuolumne River in Yosemite to provide water for San Francisco. What she contributes to this famous account are the background on the key players and an examination of how they emerged from an interlocking web of histories and interests to adopt opposing goals. She also helps us understand how adversity led to new victories as the conservationists’ loss of the Hetch Hetchy debate stimulated the founding of the National Park Service, the Wilderness Society, and national policies toward wild lands and wildlife. Recent actions of the Bush Administration fit into patterns of earlier tensions and disputes, which she carefully dissect.

In addition to discussing the period’s leading landscape architects, conservationists, and planners who are well known today, Simo introduces figures who have been forgotten or whose type of writing is rarely read by contemporary historians. For example, we learn of the career of Walter Pritchard Eaton, a successful critic of the New York stage, who retreated to the Berkshire Mountains of western Massachusetts and became a probing commentator on the land and its animal and human inhabitants. She introduces us to Louis Halle, a career bureaucrat at the State Department, who cured his failing eyesight by deserting his desk to explore the surviving wildness he could find in the capital, as reported in Spring in Washington (New York, 1947). Simo incorporates figures familiar to architectural historians, such as Charles Keeler, Lewis Mumford, and Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer, but reads them within a broad context of relationships to natural and humanized landscapes. Not only do we benefit from her study of both ignored and respected texts, but she often provides analysis of how these books were written, documenting changes that were made by editors or demanded by publishers. She traces the evolution from systematic botany to integrated ecology in the publications of numerous academics, amateurs, and designers. Ultimately, Simo is at pains to analyze how people navigated between the poetic and the scientific in their formation of ideals of nature, a feat she also engages successfully, with a clear preference for the former.

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Matthew Gandy
Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City
Urban and Industrial Environments

What do the establishment of the Croton Water System in early-nineteenth-century New York and the defeat of a proposal to construct a large waste incinerator in the Brooklyn Navy Yard in the late twentieth century have in common? Matthew Gandy, an urban geographer and winner of the Society of Architectural Historians’ 2003 Spiro Kostof Award, seeks to establish a link through five case studies that present his argument: the idea of the modern city is tied to the changing use, meaning, and understanding of nature. The title Concrete and Clay is never really explained, but it can be seen as a metaphor. Unadulterated nature is the clay. Gandy presents a “metropolitan nature,” the concrete, reworked from the raw materials of nature and intrinsically molded by capital as it has shaped urban space.

Gandy examines the establishment and expansion of the New York City municipal water system in chapter one, “Water, Space, and Power,” as a strategic urban vision that controlled disease and fire while promoting industrialization. Such a modern engineered water system, beginning with the Croton Aqueduct in 1842 and expanded into the Catskills and the Delaware River watershed in the twentieth century, enhanced the economic efficiency of urban space for capital investment. To protect that investment, New York exerted its political influence to take over land in the system’s watersheds well beyond its geographic jurisdiction. Gandy brings the story to the present and identifies the contradictory impulses that now control water systems. By the late twentieth century, problems with infrastructure, federal environmental regulations, and increasing suburbanization were all placing strains on the water system, while
exacerbating the tensions between upstate and downstate, various political elites, and broader public interests.

The second chapter, “Symbolic Order and the Urban Pastoral,” looks at Central Park, which Gandy calls the most important public space created in nineteenth-century America and a testament to the enduring place of nature in urban design. He examines the political, economic, and cultural developments that created the park, while exploring its role in fostering a civil society and in enhancing the value of the surrounding real estate. In their Greensward Plan, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux articulated a new kind of mediation between nature and culture, one that looked more wild than urban, a “seeming Nature” (in the words of journalist Henry Cleaveland), that presented an imaginary nature to an urban audience. Gandy points out that the early frequenters of Central Park were largely members of an elite who promoted its creation as part of a larger social improvement crusade. Nonetheless, the park was larger than a single vision or group. It has succeeded as a public space and has been created as much by its varied users over time (Central Park celebrated its 150th birthday in 2003) as by a single designer in the person of Olmsted.

The vision of the modern, as exemplified in the work of Robert Moses, created a new, larger-scale urban landscape that replaced the Olmstedian picturesque of the nineteenth century. In chapter three, “Technological Modernism and the Urban Parkway,” Gandy moves into the linear perception of nature in the cities and suburbs of the twentieth century as seen from the automobile. Olmsted, Vaux, and their younger colleague, Charles Eliot, had created urban parkways in Brooklyn and Boston. The modern arterial parkway was a new kind of metropolitan park devoted to leisure and mobility via the motorcar, a scenic utopia reflecting an authentic American landscape. Traveling the parkway in an automobile, one could experience an uninterrupted escape (as there were few or no cross streets) from the nineteenth-century city to suburb. Highway engineering and landscape architecture were integrated, and nature, as seen through the vehicle’s windows, became a panoramic experience. New York City had one hundred miles of parkways and freeways by 1933, but the number of automobiles grew faster than the roads to carry them. In this chapter, Gandy finally defines a term he uses in earlier sections: “Fordist” (derived from Henry Ford and the assembly line), the conjunction of social, cultural, and organizational forms that underpin this era of rapid and sustained economic expansion and spread of new consumption norms (124).

The role of Moses and the implementation of the vision of the Regional Plan Association (RPA) are the heart of this chapter. He and the RPA fostered the business interests of New York City, making it the international center of capitalism, while linking a populist urban vision to middle-class consumption and aspirations. A shift occurred after World War II when highway construction became increasingly politicized and urban planning policy ever more polarized. Opposition to the Lower Manhattan Expressway fed opposition to Westway and its ultimate collapse. As Gandy concludes, “the very idea of a landscaped parkway had become an anachronism” (147).

In his last two chapters, Gandy shifts into an account of two relatively recent social movements and a very expansive view of the reshaping of nature and the urban environment. Chapter four, “Between Borinquen and the Barrio,” describes the rise of the environmental justice movement and the historical connections between environmental politics and social justice. He focuses on the Young Lords, a group founded in the 1960s in Chicago and New York by second-generation Puerto Ricans. In their efforts to improve living conditions in the ghetto, create new community spaces, and assert cultural identity, they (not the technical and cultural elites) changed nature from the streets. Gandy presents a social history of the associations between New York and Puerto Rico, based on trade that ultimately led to a monocultural sugar-based economy and economic exploitation. As living conditions worsened in Puerto Rico, many relocated to the mainland, especially New York. There they sought to influence and improve their immediate environment. But demands for Puerto Rican independence and increasing violence in the 1970s ultimately split the community and alienated other supporters. Although the author does not mention it, the 1975 bombing of Fraunces Tavern in lower Manhattan was one of the final blows to the movement.

In the final chapter, “Rustbelt Ecology,” Gandy sets out to show how, in the 1990s, progressive environmental politics transcended nature and culture—or to put it in a more mundane way, how the quest to deal with New York City’s garbage helped transform nature and landscape hundreds of miles away. New York produces fourteen million tons of solid waste per year, and there is no single way of handling it satisfactorily. Landfills, incinerators, recycling, and source reduction all have their problematic aspects. Because of environmental regulations enacted in the 1970s, the city sought to shift waste from landfills, most notably the Fresh Kills site on Staten Island, to incinerators. Mayor Edward Koch initially proposed the construction of a massive incinerator in the Brooklyn Navy Yard in 1978. This became the catalyst for community protests in Greenpoint and Williamsburg—another form of environmental activism. The protests stretched the process out long enough that no other landfills were available and the costs of constructing and operating the proposed Brooklyn incinerator had become too high. Ironically, the result was the creation of waste-transfer stations on the city’s waterfords and the distribution of New York’s garbage to poor rural communities elsewhere. Thus “exclusionary conceptions of environmental justice merely transfer pollution onto less powerful communities” (227). From safe drinking water in the early nineteenth century to garbage disposal
in the late twentieth, New York City has had to control nature to achieve its capitalistic destiny.

As one may infer from this synopsis, Gandy does not present a conventional history of architecture, landscape architecture, planning, or engineering for any of his five case studies. Nor do his notes offer many specifics in the literature of those fields. He seems curiously removed from the physicality of what he is analyzing. For example, there is little sense of the engineering and planning achievements of the Croton system. Nor does he really answer the question of why Central Park has endured and is successful. Instead he focuses on the social and economic forces that shaped the five aspects of New York City that he has studied, and presents information that is useful and provocative. Such an approach is consistent with the MIT Press series Urban and Industrial Environments to which this book belongs, but it may prove somewhat difficult for many architectural historians. The reader also has to contend with Gandy’s use of the jargon of urban geography. Gandy explains that he wrote the book out of a fascination with New York City that grew over ten years, “its contradictory character” which juxtaposes “a sophisticated public sphere with the raw energies of a global financial center,” and how it exemplifies the relationships between “nature, cities, and social power” (ix). The reader who knows the physical city of New York and the relevant literature of architecture, landscape, and planning will probably be better equipped to appreciate Gandy’s arguments than the uninitiated.

Gandy concludes with the observation that “urban nature is a collage of past and present . . . . In New York City we are confronted with successive layers of urban change” (234). The book went to press shortly after September 11, 2001. Fresh Kills landfill, which had closed at the end of 2000, was reopened as a massive recovery site for the debris of the World Trade Center. Eventually the landfill will be covered and landscaped, its layers to be examined by future archaeologists. As the ruins were removed from the site of the World Trade Center, more strata of that site were revealed. Their future remains a subject of intense debate, but what is created on the site will certainly portray “urban nature” with all its contradictions.

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