

Melosi, Martin V. *The Sanitary City: Urban Infrastructure in America from Colonial Times to the Present*, Creating the North American Landscape Series. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. Pp. xii, 578, black-and-white illustrations, photographs, bibliographical essay, and index. US\$59.95

James G. Hanley

Volume 29, numéro 1, october 2000

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016437ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016437ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Hanley, J. G. (2000). Compte rendu de [Melosi, Martin V. *The Sanitary City: Urban Infrastructure in America from Colonial Times to the Present*, Creating the North American Landscape Series. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. Pp. xii, 578, black-and-white illustrations, photographs, bibliographical essay, and index. US\$59.95]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 29(1), 75–76. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016437ar>

Wilson and Johns Hopkins University Press should be congratulated for including thirty-two black-and-white photographs that visually establish the physical neighbourhood and many of its residents. Two chapters on the Hamilton Park School accurately reflect the community's middle-class outlook and aspirations.

Wilson details an intransigent white community's objections to a series of plans to house Dallas blacks—in public housing units, new segregated enclaves, and transitional (formerly all-white) neighbourhoods in South Dallas. Protests, threats, and violence were commonplace throughout the 1940s, culminating in 1950 and 1951 with a series of bombings in south Dallas. Most African Americans in Dallas were poor, but the lack of housing for blacks was so acute that the racial-relations advisor for the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) estimated a market for almost 1,500 middle-class homes ranging from \$5,000 to \$7,500 (21).

The city's elite pursued the development of Hamilton Park in large part to quell the violence that resulted when middle-class blacks purchased homes in white neighbourhoods. Some saw support for black housing as consistent with public discourse emphasizing policies that benefited the city as a whole. It was the violence, however, and its perceived damage to the city's reputation that transformed rhetoric into action. Hamilton Park was dedicated in 1953. Construction continued until 1960. Wilson argues that, while white participation was necessary to develop the subdivision, by the end of the 1950s Hamilton Park's "destiny was in the hands of its residents, as much as a community's fate may be decided locally" (54).

Hamilton Park residents organized politically through an Interorganizational Council (IOC) that worked in tandem with the Democratic Party to bring candidates to the neighborhood and urge residents to vote. The Civic League "fought encroachments such as the lumber yard and waged a ceaseless campaign against potholes and poorly maintained property" (197). The Civic League circulated a petition in 1957 and organized visits to the park board over the next few years that resulted in playground equipment, a wading pool, a lighted baseball diamond with bleachers, a lighted tennis court, fences, trees, and sidewalks for Willowdell Park, the area's only significant recreational facility (97–8). By 1966, the city had paved all but three of the neighbourhood's back alleys. The Civic League also won street lights, stop signs, crosswalk markings, and extra police patrols to cut down on reckless driving (99–100).

Hamilton Park residents like Charles Smith who asserted, "We've always squealed and we've gotten the grease" and Mrs. Willie B. Johnson who explained, "I'd go to their meetings. . . . I asked questions" exemplify the effectiveness of Hamilton Park's organizers and the resiliency of residents (186–7). Nevertheless, city leaders refused to ameliorate frequent flooding along Cottonwood Creek and did not protect the community from adverse effects of the urban growth they vigorously pursued. In the mid-1980s, a developer offered to buy every residence in Hamilton Park for \$35 per square foot—at least \$250,000 for

houses and lots that cost about \$9,000 in the 1950s (162). The buyout never materialized, after oil prices dropped and Texas real estate lost much of its value. Commercial growth and major transportation arteries around Hamilton Park make the area ripe for redevelopment, however. According to Wilson, gentrification is unlikely, due to the small sizes of Hamilton Park's houses and lots, leaving the community "uncongenial to anything but a thorough replatting and rebuilding" (198).

Wilson concludes that Hamilton Park was a "worthwhile if inadequate response to the serious problem of housing middle-income Dallas blacks" and asserts that the segregated community thrived in ways that deserve the attention of urban historians and planners (viii). Hamilton Park is very likely doomed. Still, Wilson is correct to point out that the future does not negate the community's historical value. His well-researched and sensitive treatment reveals a model of community life that flourished for a time in an inhospitable setting. Hamilton Park's history bears witness to a community's active struggle with power, and also to the hollowness of paternalistic rhetoric.

Patricia Evridge Hill  
Social Science Department  
San José State University

---

Melosi, Martin V. *The Sanitary City: Urban Infrastructure in America from Colonial Times to the Present, Creating the North American Landscape Series*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. Pp. xii, 578, black-and-white illustrations, photographs, bibliographical essay, and index. US\$59.95.

Martin Melosi, director of the Institute for Public History at the University of Houston, has a long and impressive record in urban environmental history. In this thought-provoking volume he presents an overview of urban infrastructure—by which he means water supply, wastewater removal, and the disposal of garbage—in the United States from colonial times to the present. More than a historical synthesis, however, the book also deals with contemporary concerns about pollution, and though Melosi avoids unnecessary alarmism, one cannot finish this important book without a renewed sense of concern for the future of our urban environments.

The book is divided into three periods, each characterized by a different environmental paradigm: the age of miasmas (colonial times up to 1880), the age of bacteriology (1880–1945), and the new ecology (1945 to the present). For each of his divisions and subdivisions, Melosi generally adopts a common format: an introductory chapter outlining the demographic, economic, political, legal, and scientific context of urban sanitation, followed by successive chapters on water supply, wastewater and sewage removal, and the disposal of solid waste. These chapters explain relevant sanitary technologies, chart their diffusion from a national perspective, and describe their application in specific

urban contexts. Melosi's treatment of sanitary technologies, based on his extensive use of contemporary engineering periodicals, is particularly informative.

Melosi's principal thesis is that the environmental views at any given time broadly "shape" the nature and function of the infrastructure (10). Of crucial importance to Melosi's story, if only because it was first in the field, is the miasmatic theory, which was imported from England in the mid-nineteenth century. Generally equating the smells generated by decomposing waste with disease, this theory provided a theoretical framework for action, and under its guidance the rudimentary, private, individual solutions to urban sanitary problems that developed during the colonial period gave way to systematic water supplies and sewerage schemes.

The bacteriological revolution that succeeded the miasmatic era substituted bacteria for miasmas but did not fundamentally reshape water and sewerage technologies, though bacteriology emphasized the need for water filtration or treatment of some type. The extension of sanitary systems during this period continued apace, and by the end of World War I, most urban areas had some sort of sanitary system in place. The principal novelty in the bacteriological era was expansion and reorganization of refuse or garbage services as the third pillar of sanitary engineering.

In spite of the theoretical differences between the miasmatic and bacteriological paradigms, Melosi powerfully illustrates the long-term legacy of their shared concern with disease-causing biological contaminants, in the discussion of his third era. The new ecology, which developed after 1945, was and is characterized by a broader conception of the sources, scope, and consequences of pollution, yet the sanitary systems constructed under the previous paradigms, intended to be long-term solutions to the prevailing concerns of the day, are ill-adapted to

deal with newer concerns such as industrial pollution. Urban and, increasingly, national planners and policy makers are thus faced with a doubly daunting challenge: the existing infrastructure badly needs reinvestment, yet it is not clear that more of the same is what is required.

Melosi's principal thesis is unobjectionable, but, as Melosi recognizes and attempts to illustrate, the application of an environmental paradigm to specific urban settings requires attention to the myriad factors that governed infrastructure reform and to the diversity of solutions to sanitary problems developed in American cities this period. The lack of detailed analyses of particular urban histories may be the most disappointing part of the book for urban historians, though, to be fair, Melosi's stated goal was to delineate broader national trends. At other times, however, the wealth of detail occasionally overwhelms the narrative, particularly in Melosi's discussion of important post-1945 legal and regulatory developments. Finally, the odd error creeps in when Melosi moves away from his area of specialization: anthrax was not the first disease in which a micro-organism was identified as the cause, and Pasteur had not worked on it before 1877 (111); London's Metropolitan Board of Works was not established by the 1855 Nuisances Removal Act (52). And there are occasional proofreading lapses (yellow fever instead of typhoid fever on page 85).

Notwithstanding these minor criticisms, Melosi has provided urban and environmental historians and activists with a useful framework that should help orient future research in the area. This attractively produced book deserves the broad readership that its author intended.

James G. Hanley  
Department of History  
University of Winnipeg