

Reading the Landscape of the City Interdisciplinary Investigations of Nature and Culture in the Chicago Region

Presentation Outline:

Opening Discussion: Nature / City

Class Framework and Format

- Interdisciplinary gen ed seminar
- Face-to-face / online / field trips
- Student profile and assumptions

Representations of the Urban Environment

- Nature as object of study
- Urban landscape (built and natural)
- Multiple perspectives: environmental history, fiction, natural history, urban planning, landscape architecture, photography
- Dichotomy of city and wilderness

Key Texts

- Terrell Dixon, ed., *City Wilds* (anthology of American urban nature writing)
- Sally Kitt Chappell, *Chicago's Urban Nature* (architecture and landscape critical guidebook)
- Lois Wille, *Forever Open, Free, and Clear* (environmental history of the lakefront)

Chicago as Cultural Resource and Urban Wilderness

- Chicago History Museum
- Chicago Humanities Festival
- Wolf Point (Chicago River)

Reactions and Reflections on Student Learning

- Problematizing ideas about nature and the city
- Investigating local history (region / city / neighborhoods)
- Developing practical interpretive strategies
- Seeing the humanities as connected to the social and natural sciences

Passages for Illustration and Reflection:

Wilderness hides its unnaturalness behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural. As we gaze into the mirror it holds up for us, we too easily imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires. For this reason, we mistake ourselves when we suppose that wilderness can be the solution to our culture's problematic relationships with the nonhuman world, for wilderness is itself no small part of the problem."

-- William Cronon,
"The Trouble with Wilderness" (1)

[U]rban nature, like its wilderness and rural counterparts, can evoke in us that essential component of environmental awareness and commitment: a sense of place. . . . The key is to realize that [this] . . . can be evoked by and bind us to our city places as well as our wilderness areas and to know that a sense of reverence for one locale engenders a greater regard for all of nature.

-- Terrell Dixon,
Introduction to *City Wilds* (xv)

[A new approach to urban nature] seeks to interpret the ways that architecture and landscape enhance each other when combined in a single setting so that readers and visitors will see the built environment in a new way. Instead of viewing spaces as negatives or voids, whether in parks or plazas, they will experience them as positive forces in the life of a city. Parks, plazas, gardens, and rooftops are culture-producing places, not merely places for retreat. Sidewalks and bridges become ends in themselves instead of just a means of getting from one place to another. It follows that Chicago is then a case study for principles that are applicable in cities worldwide.

-- Sally Kitt Chappell,
Chicago's Urban Nature (xxv)

Cited Works and Further Reading:

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