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Dissertation Proposal

Bottoms, Hollows, and Flats: Making and Remaking the Lowlands, An Urban

Environmental History

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Abstract

For more than two hundred years, Americans have settled in, covered up, and made over low places in cities such as marshes, creeks, streams, and swamps. Urban lowlands have presented both constraints and opportunities for city builders, attracting specific types of land uses over time and garnering particular representations and/or popular meanings. A long-lasting association between low-income residence and low-lying land has strongly influenced both our image of the city and the life experiences of many Americans. Unwanted or difficult-to-develop land, polluted or flood-prone watercourses, and other “sinks” are a part of every city’s development. Theories of disease, city form, landscape design, industrial development, “community,” and economy have shaped them: each set of ideas offering a different lens for viewing the lowlands, so to speak, from above. For city dwellers with few choices and limited resources, the “bottoms” have represented a paradox: a place to call home because no one else wanted it. Combining landscape description and socio-economic (and ethnic/racial) labels such as “Black Bottom” or “Swede Hollow,” these place names are evocative indicators of the “social contours of the land (Sandweiss 1997: 90).”

In this dissertation, I trace the human history of these places, identifying layers of development over lowlands. I focus on the people who owned these lands and the processes of land subdivision, transfer, development, and redevelopment. Specifically, I ask the questions: How have landowners, property developers, insurers, real estate interests, and other urban actors directed the growth and expansion of cities in relation to the low features of the land, places that do not fit neatly into the city grid or urban image? That is, what happens when and where “city” meets “bottom”? Furthermore, what cultural, political, economic, and other forces have informed urban actors’ perceptions, calculations, and decision-making with respect to the development and redevelopment of urban lowlands? I employ a case study method, examining historic maps, texts, photographs, and plans from eight cities in the United States. I devote particular attention to land records, including titles and deeds, tax assessor and fire insurance maps, tract maps, and land subdivision documents. An analysis of newspaper accounts, as well as a photographic survey of current landscape conditions will also be employed. Urban lowlands display the tension between urban development pressures and the “given” terrain of cities. As such, the bottoms reveal much about how urban systems and natural systems interrelate and how urban actors exercise power in the interstices, assigning land uses and urban populations to these conjointly produced spaces.