

Sites Unseen: Uncovering Hidden Hazards in American Cities, by Scott Frickel and James R. Elliott. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, ISBN 9780871544285; 154 pp. \$29.95 paperback

Reviewed by

Jacob Lederman

University of Michigan-Flint

Cities concentrate social and economic activities, but they are also rich repositories of historical processes. Their past physically accumulates over time like layers of sediment in the urban social body. Our awareness of this palimpsest is typically confined to heady archeological discoveries and their summoning of an ancient past. Scott Frickel and James Elliott's *Sites Unseen* asks us to think about cities' recent histories in ways that are far closer to home. What urban relics has our own civilization produced? How are ecologically hazardous sites remembered or forgotten, shaped by local and national institutions and regulations that construct our sense of danger? As this book expertly shows, the urban relics of an industrial society are more mundane than an ancient archeological dig, but also more noxious. Our tacit obliviousness to the chemical processes taking place beneath our homes, schools, or playgrounds suggests that such relics are part of a past that many of us would prefer to ignore.

At its core, *Sites Unseen* is an archival study of industrial sites in Philadelphia, New Orleans, Minneapolis, and Portland resulting in the creation of the Historically Hidden Industrial Database (HHID). Using state-level directories of manufacturers compiled since at least the 1950s, the authors bring to life a history of industrial and residential churn. Older industrial cities such as Philadelphia, and particularly their gentrifying urban cores, offer a stark example of the socio-environmental processes at the center of this research. Neighborhoods like Philadelphia's trendy Northern Liberties are shown to be maelstroms of industrial activity, containing literally hundreds of former sites of light and heavy manufacturing within a few square blocks. That these blocks are now home to upper-income residents, fashionable stores, and new condominium developments shows how environmental processes shape and are reshaped by new spatial configurations.

Frickel and Elliott refer to this process as socioenvironmental succession, taking a page from the biological metaphors that the early Chicago School advanced. Reformulating a long-standing dualism

This is the author manuscript accepted for publication and has undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the [Version of Record](#). Please cite this article as [doi: 10.1111/cico.12408](https://doi.org/10.1111/cico.12408).

This article is protected by copyright. All rights reserved.

in urban sociology, the authors argue that work in the political economy tradition expands upon and further develops the ecological approach into a more insightful whole. This analytic splitting the difference is nothing to gripe about on balance, but socioenvironmental succession as a concept might have advanced further by jettisoning these constructs altogether in favor of novel theoretical terrain. For example, the authors (as well as forward writer Harvey Molotch) mention the contributions of Actor Network Theory to our understanding of how objects such as physical waste “act” upon social reality, yet little more is done with these insights. This shortcoming, however, should hardly be described as such because Frickel and Elliott’s empirical work points to many future research agendas and conceptual possibilities. As a result, socioenvironmental succession is a step in the right direction as urban and environmental sociologists advance this growing field of inquiry.

Broken up into three main empirical chapters, *Sites Unseen* examines industrial churn, residential churn, and the “risk containment” strategies of regulatory bodies, many of which fail to “see” the sites uncovered in these pages. Of note is the pervasiveness of industrial sites and their physical detritus, always expanding over time even if urban residents and official histories have short memories. Strikingly, the authors show that new hazardous industrial sites are not disappearing as the post-industrial thesis would have it, but rather are shrinking in size and number of workers. For example, between 2000–2004, 123,000 new manufacturing facilities came online (p. 53), some 52% of which employed fewer than 10 workers.

If new and old manufacturing facilities are pervasive and growing, residential movement (especially to reinvested neighborhoods in the older urban core) present a novel set of questions. How does residential movement reshape social-class and racial disparities in terms of environmental risk? Somewhat paradoxically, the authors show that the correlation between the number of active hazardous sites, race, and class are unclear in all cities but Portland. In Philadelphia and Minneapolis, race and class had some power in predicting the number of active hazardous sites in the 1970s and 80s. Those trends however, began to reverse by the 1990s and today have all but disappeared. Portland was and remains the only city that consistently showed higher income and white residents more insulated from these environmental risks, as the environmental justice scholarship would suggest.

For “relic” industrial sites the same is true. Affluent and white populations are moving into areas with a higher concentration of former industrial sites. The empirical and statistical work in this chapter is formidable enough that it is difficult to quibble with the results. Yet these conclusions and the empiricism upon which they rest deserve a note of caution. The authors’ claim that these figures may diverge from the conventional view of environmental justice scholarship overlooks the way risk can never be assessed in absolute terms but is always mediated by the social production of infrastructure, waterway, or food systems. By way of example, the potential existence of hazardous sites in higher-income communities can be analogized in the presence of lead paint in homes across the country. Yet it is the toxic interaction of poverty, inequality, and institutional disregard that make such materials pernicious, not their existence per se. We are all always at risk, as *Sites Unseen* correctly notes, but the management of these risks may be the greater determinant of injustice, an agenda that future scholars using this data might embrace more fully.

The institutional management of environmental hazards is the focus of the final empirical chapter. The absence of regulatory interest in smaller hazardous sites is evident in the fact that non-

hazardous commercial uses represented the most common fate of a random sample of properties in the authors' database. Once again, the authors show that factors such as longevity of industrial uses and size of these facilities is correlated with a regulatory response, not race or class. The authors offer the appropriate caveats in interpreting this data, but the rigor of their empirics can obscure a larger point, which no doubt future scholars will take up using these innovative methods. Without knowing the true risks of these former industrial sites, and without a conceptual apparatus that better reflects the way risk itself is produced through socially-mediated responses, the absence of race and class correlation appears less convincing.

Nonetheless, this is a book that environmental and urban sociologists should embrace for its historical breadth, impressive data collection, and novel set of research questions. Beyond the issues raised above, the seeds planted here have room to grow over the understudied terrain of our industrial past. The ambitious spatial analysis represented by this book offers a convincing path forward for this growing field.