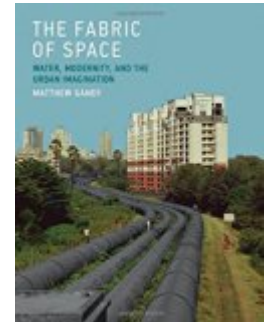


**Matthew Gandy.** *The Fabric of Space: Water, Modernity, and the Urban Imagination.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014. 368 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-262-02825-7.



**Reviewed by** Eliza Martin

**Published on** H-Urban (August, 2015)

**Commissioned by** Alexander Vari (Marywood University)

Water is currently a trendy topic for journalists, scientists, and scholars, with most portending a myriad of impending water-related ecological disasters for both the American and global public. Water is on one hand an American dilemma: from having too much of it, as demonstrated in the flooding that took place this summer from Texas to the East Coast, to the lack of it with the drought in California and the Southwest, and the loss of it with groundwater depletion happening across the nation. Likewise, water dominates the world stage for similar reasons that are only heightened as we see the ramifications of global climate change.

In his ambitious study *The Fabric of Space: Water, Modernity, and the Urban Imagination*, geographer Matthew Gandy is ultimately more optimistic than most as he explores the complex relationships between water, cities, and people. The book centers around six metropolises spread across the globe--Paris, Berlin, Lagos, Mumbai, Los Angeles, and London--which he uses as case studies to explore the relationship between, as he puts it, “modernity, nature, and the urban imagi-

nation” (p. 2). Gandy asserts that examining the changing paths water takes through urban spaces gives us new ways of viewing and understanding cities and how they evolve. He is particularly interested in the process of modernization of urban space, and the role water infrastructure plays in that activity. Gandy states that controlling water is a key aspect of modernization and state formation, yet, as can be seen from his examples, this is not a movement of steady development applied evenly across nations, meaning these instances problematize the idea of a singular definition of modernity.

Gandy’s research is in conversation with other scholarship focused on the intersection of the environment, especially water, and urban space, including historian Martin Melosi’s book *The Sanitary City* (1999) and the work of urban theorists Mike Davis and Maria Kaika.[1] Throughout his book, Gandy delves into themes as sweeping as the juncture of capitalism and urbanization, social inequality, city-dwellers changing relationships with nature, and shifting attitudes toward

the body. In order to make these connections, Gandy's book is necessarily an interdisciplinary one—he draws from areas including history, geography, and film studies to tease out these relationships—and this interdisciplinarity appears prominently in his source base. The sources Gandy draws upon to produce his study include an extensive list of secondary sources from multiple academic disciplines, as well as interviews, ethnographic observation, archival material, film, photographs, and literature. Though sweeping, this work is definitely written with an advanced academic readership in mind. While the chapters stand on their own as case studies, I would hesitate to recommend this book for undergraduates or claim that it is the most accessible for a popular readership.

The book opens with the reconstruction of the Paris sewer system in the late nineteenth century under the oversight of administrator Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann. The newly constructed sewers became a symbol of progress for the modernizing city, though Gandy argues that “the reorganization of subterranean Paris held implications far beyond the modernization of drainage and sanitation” (p. 28). The changing physical space of the sewers also marked a change in patterns of water usage for city residents. Though originally built for the removal of storm water, as new ideas concerning disease, hygiene, privacy, and the proper way to dispose of bodily waste gained popularity, the Paris sewers began to be used more in the way we make use of our sewers today—as conduits for sewage as well as wastewater. In turn, this paved the way for a new relationship with nature for city residents, as urbanites' experiences of nature moved away from their organic roots, and towards a more rationalized, ordered environment, with nature seen as a place of leisure.

Gandy continues with this theme of interactions between water, the body, and space, and demonstrates this movement towards an empha-

sis on nature as leisure, when he discusses changes in urban planning taking place in Weimar Berlin. As part of creating a modern city, Martin Wagner, city building commissioner in Berlin, was concerned with providing residents, especially working-class residents, with an opportunity to have contact with nature. Wagner felt one way to do this was to provide access to local lakes and rivers as spaces of leisure. Wagner moved to protect remaining lakeside land from privatization to keep these areas open for the city as a whole, as a public resource, and provided public transportation to these areas. Here we see links between water and infrastructure as not purely a public health issue, but also as about democratizing access to urban space, and offering working-class Berliners the chance to enjoy urban nature.

Through the next chapters Gandy continues to discuss links between class status, social inequality, disease, and water. First he discusses ties between water, modernity, and urban nature made evident through exposure to mosquitos and malaria in postcolonial Lagos—a different take on links between water and disease than the typical focus on specifically waterborne pathogens. The presence of malaria works to push back against ideas of Lagos as a modern city. Next, he continues to highlight these themes with a chapter on Mumbai, a city that cannot manage to create a modern water infrastructure system to service all of its residents due to a mix of expense and lack of political will. The social inequality of the city is made evident by who has access to clean, running water, and who does not. Though he never explicitly refers to this as an environmental justice issue, Gandy does state that the city's water system stands at the “intersection between the urbanization of nature and the exercise of social power” (p. 136). And this infrastructure demonstrates a divide not only between poor and wealthier residents, but also between urban and rural dwellers,

as increasing water resources are transferred from rural areas for urban use.

Finally, Gandy concludes his book by looking at the channelized Los Angeles River in the present, and the future of flooding in London. He offers interesting insight into the literal and figurative parallels between LA's freeways and the channelized Los Angeles River, and makes other cogent points, but otherwise there are few major reconceptualizations included in his discussion of Los Angeles from a historical perspective. Still, he sees both of these cities as possible portents of what is to come. In his last chapter Gandy argues that as stakeholders, we have a choice when it comes to the future of water infrastructure, and perhaps there should be an evolution away from these large, complex infrastructure projects that helped to define modernity through controlling nature. Engineers must instead create models that work alongside nature, essentially embracing an increasingly "ecologically oriented approach" that offers a more holistic attitude towards water and urban nature (p. 206).

This book offers Gandy the opportunity to bring together his earlier studies of these cities, and it is impressive to see a book that covers such wide geographical and temporal space. It is a shame that Gandy included no South American cities in the study, particularly because Brazil, along with China, is a center of contemporary massive water infrastructure construction, yet both countries seem to look back towards these large development projects of the past rather than to the ecologically minded future Gandy puts forth in his final chapter. To strengthen the work, I wish the study had further connected all of these cities and discussed the flow of ideas from one locale to the next. This effort would have rendered the narrative less episodic and more global in scope. Gandy obviously chose these places to show different relationships between water and urban space, but I wanted to see more pertaining to the connections as well. The ideas about mod-

ernization, progress, and the proper relationships between people and nature presented here have a history, and the addition of more of this history would be a plus. As another small quibble, I wish the author, or the publishers, would have chosen a more descriptive first half of the book title.

To grossly generalize, there seem to be two different issues at the root of urban areas' water woes--having excessive amounts of the resource, which leaves urban areas flooded or prone to disease, and not having enough, again leaving residents vulnerable to disease and open to a range of other environmental, social, and economic problems. Gandy's work highlights the links between flooding and climate change, but aside from referencing Mumbai's increasing reach into the countryside to secure a larger, more reliable water supply, nowhere in his book does he address the issue of drought. Even though Gandy suggests that flooding is overtaking drought as the water fear of the future, I would have liked to see more on the impacts of drought, a discussion which would have continued to solidify the book's themes.

Commendably, throughout the book Gandy does an admirable job of addressing issues of race, class, and gender that are playing a role in the creation of these urban spaces. Links between class and access to water play out even in the modernized United States. A cogent example can be seen in contemporary Southern California, as the wealthiest residents of the state refuse to cut back their water use to support the common good. Water has a way of revealing flows of power, and Gandy consistently nods to this relationship.

Overall, this study is insightful, intellectually rigorous, and remarkable in its breadth of sources and interdisciplinary reach. It is a necessary read for those interested in the intersection of environment, infrastructure, and urban space.

#### Note

[1]. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 2006), and *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination*

*of Disaster* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998);  
Maria Kaika, *City of Flows: Modernity, Nature,  
and the City* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

**Citation:** Eliza Martin. Review of Gandy, Matthew. *The Fabric of Space: Water, Modernity, and the Urban Imagination*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. August, 2015.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=43568>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No  
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.