

THE MIASMIST: GEORGE E. WARING, JR. AND THE EVOLUTION OF MODERN PUBLIC HEALTH

Seavitt Nordenson, Catherine

City College of New York, cseavittnordenson@ccny.cuny.edu

ABSTRACT

George E. Waring, Jr. developed an influential manual in 1867 entitled *Draining for Profit, Draining for Health*, reflecting two particular obsessions of the gilded age—wealth and miasma. Waring supported the long-held miasma, or anti-contagionist, theory, insisting that diseases were spread through the air, emerging as a poisonous vapor from damp soil. By the 1880s, the new contagionist theory of the germ was gaining European support, yet Waring remained a lifelong miasmist, supporting the anti-contagionist movement in the United States. He applied his technical knowledge of farm drainage to an urban theory of public sanitation, beginning with the drainage plan for Central Park in 1856, continuing with studies for Memphis and Havana, and culminating with the Department of Street Cleaning in New York City. Though Waring conducted his work on scientifically unsound precepts, his conclusions regarding drainage were correct. Waring is an important yet unsung hero of urban environmental history; his significant body of primary texts are worth revisiting to enhance current urban green infrastructure practices in the landscape architecture profession. Given the miasmists' interest in urban disease transfer, particularly the spread of cholera and yellow fever, Waring's emphasis on the sanitation of the physical environment is worth reassessing in light of current public health issues arising from the impact of climate change and the rise of vector-driven diseases such as Zika and dengue. Waring's environmental emphasis on clean water, air, and soil reflects a contemporary vision of improving public health by reducing urban impacts on the atmosphere and waterways.

Keywords

George E. Waring, Jr., Central Park, public health, green infrastructure, drainage, miasma, contagionism