

**Robert Gioielli**

### **Hard Asphalt and Heavy Metals: An Environmental History of the Urban Crisis**

This project is the story of a wave of environmental activism that swept across America's cities during the 1960s and 1970s. In the process, it examines how the decline of America's older, industrial cities transformed the urban landscape, the interconnections between different postwar social movements, and how the mainstream American environmental movement, by privileging certain types of environmental knowledge, marginalized minorities and poor and working class urbanites during the latter decades of the twentieth century.

The core of the project is case studies of urban environmental movements in three cities: Baltimore, St. Louis, and Chicago. Through these stories, as well as framing chapters that connect local activism to the broader national story, this project accomplishes a number of goals. First, an exploration of the breakdown of American cities in the postwar decades will begin to historicize what is becoming an important global phenomenon: the transformation of landscapes as part of the process of deindustrialization and the decentralization of capital. In the United States, this decline is part of what historians and other scholars have labeled the "urban crisis," the panoply of social, economic, and political problems that beset American cities in the postwar era. What most accounts of the urban crisis leave out, however, is that to city residents—especially the poor, working class, and racial and ethnic minorities—urban decline was a lived, physical experience.

An analysis of the resident response to these problems accomplishes my second major goal, which is to create a profile of urban environmental activism and its connection to other postwar social movements. These urban movements were intimately entwined with other forms of postwar activism, especially with aspects of the American Civil Rights Movement, and community organizing associated with both federal government programs and private institutions. Connections to established movement structures allowed residents to express their discontent with urban environmental problems and to gain institutional support and expertise to seek redress and remediation. This support was vital because disadvantaged urbanites based their activism on experience, not science, which led them to conceive of their activism differently from the emerging mainstream environmental movement. Urban environmentalism was focused almost exclusively on problems that were both spatially and temporally immediate. Activists and residents also eschewed broad, generalized arguments that emphasized how "mankind" was destroying "his environment," and consciously connected urban environmental problems to other social inequalities, especially disparities between rich and poor, black and white, and urban and suburban.

Although this urban activism was decentralized, with no national leader or organization, it had important connections to the national environmental movement. During the 1970s, there were conscious efforts, by both national environmental groups and the federal government, to broaden the movement's constituency to include urban minorities. After the election of Ronald Reagan, the federal government became hostile to environmental regulation, and efforts to expand the environmental constituency fell by the wayside. Only with the rise of the environmental justice movement in the late 1980s

would the concerns of urban minorities and working class people begin to get a hearing. But the roots of this activism lay a generation earlier, when city residents first claimed that they were being made to bear the brunt of the problems caused by the decline and breakdown of America's older, industrial cities.