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## Making Industrial Pittsburgh Modern

**Published in:**  
Technology and Culture

**Publication status and date:**  
Published: 01/04/2021

**DOI (link to publisher):**  
[10.1353/tech.2021.0092](https://doi.org/10.1353/tech.2021.0092)

**Document Version**  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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**Citation for the published version (APA):**  
van de Laar, P. (2021). Making Industrial Pittsburgh Modern: Environment, Landscape, Transportation, and Planning. *Technology and Culture*, 62(2), 624-625. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tech.2021.0092>

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*Making Industrial Pittsburgh Modern: Environment, Landscape, Transportation, and Planning* by Edward K. Muller and Joel A. Tarr (review)

Paul van de Laar

Technology and Culture, Volume 62, Number 2, April 2021, pp. 624-625  
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tech.2021.0092>

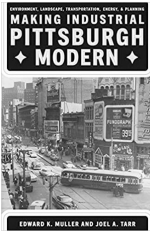


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## Making Industrial Pittsburgh Modern: Environment, Landscape, Transportation, and Planning

By Edward K. Muller and Joel A. Tarr. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019. Pp. 504.

APRIL  
2021  
VOL. 62



The urban history of industrial Pittsburgh is written in coke, steel, and smoke. Situated in southwestern Pennsylvania, west of the Allegheny Mountains, formed by the convergence of the three rivers—Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio—Pittsburgh’s development was driven by a tremendous growth of industrial corporate capitalism. The spatial expansion, which started in the 1870s, shaped a metropolitan region that counted about 1.5 million inhabitants around 1920. This golden era is not considered as a period of ultimate industrial aesthetics, but as one of the darkest for smoke pollution: “Cloud by day and fire by night” (p. 275).

Since the interwar period, Pittsburgh has undergone two renaissances, the first starting in the late 1940s and extending into the 1960s, when the city government tried to revitalize downtown and improve the Smoky City’s image by enhancing its air and water quality. However, steel and coal barons opposed alternative growth models threatening their economic power, and civic reformers overestimated their role in effectively changing existing industrial patterns.

Starting in the 1960s, established public-private coalitions were increasingly distrusted by new democratic welfare and civil rights movements. This social-cultural transition paved the way for a second renaissance, beginning in 1977 and aiming at advancing new, less-polluting and higher added-value industries and services. The dramatic collapse of Pittsburgh’s industrial status could only be met by a drastic reconceptualization of social, urban, and environmental life. The era of steel and smoke is not forgotten, but is now seen as a heritage industry, aiming to rebuild community pride and identity, mixed with postindustrial redevelopments. The story of Pittsburgh resembles that of many an industrial and port city that once benefitted from a highly specialized industry or service to gain a comparative regional or national advantage (Porfyriou and Sepe, eds., *Waterfronts Revisited*, 2017; Koven and Koven, *Growth, Decline, and Regeneration in Large Cities*, 2018).

Edward Muller and Joel Tarr, two distinguished Pittsburghian scholars, collected sixteen papers they had previously published in various journals that deal with the industrial foundation of the city, transportation and the rise of the modern city, the energy and environment of the city, and the planned modern city.

The long-lasting power of existing interests, embedded in metal-coal

utilitarian networks, is highly evident when the authors discuss the environmental aspects of Pittsburgh. Clear skies signaled unemployment and closed factories, whereas smoke meant prosperity. For instance, in 1939 the city council voted against smoke control to save jobs. When causes and effects of industrial waste for public health were not clearly defined, politicians remained idle to act and favored voluntary cooperation. Verbal assurances that business would control waste and pollution were ineffective without legal pressure. Key industries such as steel and coal pushed hard to set the standards for implementation and thus slowed down progress. The chapters reveal wicked problems, created by the relationship between business-led, cost-effective, industrial technology and public policy considerations. Because of economic and technological factors, pollution burdens were often shifted from one source of pollution to another. Controlling visible smoke, for instance, masked the need for interventions to control air pollution. Lack of knowledge, confusion over the origins and causes, and in particular cost control for private investors and fiscal considerations were the major factors slowing down decision processes. But perhaps the biggest barrier was the absence of a holistic view of industrial, environmental, and health policies. After more than one hundred years of mass-industrialization of the rivers and riverfronts, they were denaturalized and seen as industrial infrastructure.

This book is highly recommended. The case studies are rich and meaningful, demonstrating lessons to be learnt from past fallacies and how legacies of environmental neglect will impact future decision making. Yet the question remains: why didn't the editors rewrite their papers into a monograph, creating a synthesis for a general audience? Tarr's key chapter on the metabolism of the industrial city provides a starting point (pp. 296–327). Herein he captures the paradoxes of cities like Pittsburgh, carrying the “technological blight of heavy industry,” driven by economic growth, consuming its environment until it couldn't survive beyond a point of equilibrium with respect to the consumption of air, water, and land resources (p. 316).

PAUL VAN DE LAAR

Paul van de Laar is head of the department of history at the Erasmus University School of History, Culture, and Communication. He is principal investigator for the HERA joint research program: “Public Spaces: Culture and Integration in Europe,” which funds the project “Pleasurescapes, Port Cities' Transnational Forces of Integration (Barcelona, Gothenburg, Hamburg and Rotterdam),” 2019–2022 (<https://pleasurescapes.eu/>). He is also core team member of PortCityFutures, a Leiden-Delft-Erasmus collaboration ([www.portcityfutures.nl/home](http://www.portcityfutures.nl/home)).

*Citation:* Van de Laar, Paul. “Review of *Making Industrial Pittsburgh Modern: Environment, Landscape, Transportation, and Planning* by Edward K. Muller and Joel A. Tarr.” *Technology and Culture* 62, no. 2 (2021): 624–25.