

The “Valley of Ashes” and the “Fresh Green Breast”: Metaphors from *The Great Gatsby* in planning New York

ABSTRACT

Visions in planning of what a city could or should be tend to be constructed around metaphors, rhetorical tropes that crystalize the image of a preferable future city. Such metaphorizations are never innocent: they draw on preexisting cultural narratives and activate particular frames of expectation. This article examines two metaphors used in the planning of New York City, and its shores, in particular: the spectre of the ‘valley of ashes’ and the dream of the ‘fresh green breast’. These metaphors, taken from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925), appear time and again in the planning and thinking of the New York shoreline, from Robert Moses’s plans for Flushing Meadow to Mayor Bloomberg’s waterfront development and Eric Sanderson’s vision of a 2406 New York in *Mannahatta* (2006). This article examines how the metaphors of the ‘valley of ashes’ and the ‘fresh green breast’ have been adapted throughout decades of planning New York City to accommodate changing relationships, conflicts and ideals, always infused by a pastoral undercurrent that is already questioned in Fitzgerald’s novel.

KEYWORDS

Metaphor; New York; *The Great Gatsby*; ‘green breast’; ‘valley of ashes’

Introduction

Visions of what a city could or should be tend to be constructed around metaphors, rhetorical tropes that crystalize the idea of a preferable future city. Such metaphorizations are never innocent: they draw on pre-existing cultural narratives and activate particular frames of expectations.

Examinations of metaphors in urban planning have tended to focus on how they are used to insinuate a natural or causal logic to legitimize disruptive development. Zygmunt Bauman has traced the implications of metaphors, such as that of the garden, in legitimizing processes of exclusion, of ‘weeding out’ otherness;¹ Tim Cresswell has come to similar conclusions in his discussion of metaphors related to nature and the body.² But metaphors are never straightforward: they are shifting and malleable, and as imaginative transposers of meaning, they are necessarily ambiguous. One and the same metaphor used in planning can be used for different, even opposite purposes in different historical contexts.

This article examines two metaphors used in the planning of New York City: the spectre of the ‘valley of ashes’ and the dream of the ‘fresh, green breast’. These metaphors, inspired by F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925), recur intermittently in the planning of the New York shoreline, from Robert Moses’s vision for Flushing Meadow to the 1967 policy report *Threatened City* by mayor Lindsay’s urban task force, to Mayor Bloomberg’s waterfront development plans [p. 903 > p. 904] and Eric Sanderson’s 2009 propositions for a 2409 New York in *Mannahatta*. The implications of these metaphors for how they activate particular cultural narratives about the city’s relationship with its natural environment have so far remained underdeveloped, even in more recent critique of their use. Drawing on a reading of *The Great Gatsby*, and including critical responses by Louise Westling, Leo Marx, and others, this article examines how the metaphors of the ‘valley of ashes’ and the ‘fresh green breast’ have been adapted throughout decades of planning of New York City to accommodate changing relationships, conflicts and ideals, always infused by a pastoral undercurrent that is already questioned in Fitzgerald’s novel. For planning historians, an

¹ Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*.

² Cresswell, “Weeds, Plagues”, 336.

examination of these metaphors may offer important insights into how different historical planning contexts draw on the same metaphors for varying purposes.

The Great Gatsby

F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic *The Great Gatsby*, a cult novel of the jazz age, is also an investigation of the effect of urbanization on a culture driven by pastoral impulses. Central in the novel's spatial dynamics is the juxtaposition between New York City, a site of pleasure and an engine of growth, and the protagonists' suburban homes in Long Island – the place where the first-person narrator, Nick Carraway, meets the enigmatic Jay Gatsby, whose story gradually unfolds in the novel. Between these two spatial opposites, on the road from the city to the suburban garden home, lies the waste produced by the operations of modernization: the 'valley of ashes':

This is a valley of ashes — a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air.³

The site can be placed on the map of the actual New York with some precision, somewhere on the way from Long Island to Manhattan, and more specifically in the north of Queens along Flushing Creek.⁴ But as always in the city novel, the referential relationship to the real world is not straightforward,⁵ and there are also hints at Biblical references that situate it in the mystical realm of a possible Kingdom come.⁶

As a counterpart to the nightmarish valley of ashes, *The Great Gatsby* offers the dream of a phoenix-like landscape raised from the refuse of modernization. This is the 'fresh green breast' at

³ Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 29.

⁴ Steinberg, *Gotham Unbound*, 212.

⁵ Ameel, "The City Novel."

⁶ See Jeremiah 31:40; Isaiah 61:1-4.

the end of the novel, when the narrator Nick Carraway imagines how Dutch explorers must have looked at the shores of Long Island and Manhattan:

... gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes – a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.⁷

With its striking description of the landscape as ‘commensurate’ to the individual’s ‘capacity for wonder’, the oft-quoted passage suggests a malleable space in tune with man’s capacity to imagine [p. 904 > p. 905] his own as well as the landscape’s potential. It is exactly these positive implications that are repeatedly drawn upon in planning. But they have also been strongly contested, and, as I will argue below, never more than by the narrator of *The Great Gatsby* himself.

Resonance of the ‘Valley of the Ashes’ and the ‘Fresh Green Breast’

Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* quickly became a cult novel, and the ‘Valley of the Ashes’ and the ‘fresh green breast’ became symbolic currency, tropes used to express the fraught relationships of the city to its natural environment. The first correlation between the metaphors of *The Great Gatsby* and the planning of New York is implicit and lies in the similarities between the aestheticist vision of the ‘green breast’ and the views behind contemporaneous parkways constructed between the wars. Both can be seen as expressions of a desire to open up the landscape for development while revelling in aesthetic vistas that speak to the desire for a visual agency. Marshal Berman notes the artificial beauty of the new landscapes roads, especially that of the ‘Northern State Parkway, which

⁷ Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 187-188.

ran through the country of palatial estates that Scott Fitzgerald had just immortalized in *The Great Gatsby*, and adds that Robert Moses's 'Long Island roadscapes represent a modern attempt to recreate what Fitzgerald's narrator ... described as "the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes – a fresh, green breast of the new world."⁸

Lewis Mumford and Benton MacKaye, active in New York in the same period as the appearance of *The Great Gatsby* and influential figures in the development of environmental planning, do not directly refer to these metaphors from Fitzgerald's novel, but several of their concerns in this period allude indirectly to its thematics: vistas from motorways cutting through or between cities; the spectre of urban sprawl and urban waste; and the possibility of green redevelopment. Mumford's critique of urban sprawl echoes the Valley of Ashes in the menacing image of a 'vast amorphous urbanoid wasteland'⁹ and of the city's 'hazy periphery [where] one can pick out no definite shapes'¹⁰.

If the ethos of Robert Moses's Long Island roadscapes is aligned with the vision at the end of *The Great Gatsby*, one of Moses's other attempts at reshaping New York's shores also draws its symbolical resonance from Fitzgerald's novel: the metamorphosis of Flushing Meadow into the site for the 1939 world fair. Moses repeatedly drew on the metaphor of the 'valley of ashes', both in the time running up to the fair and in later decades, describing the site of the fair as 'Flushing's Great Meadow of Ashes'.¹¹ In the adaptation of the metaphor in this context, the Biblical undercurrent is notable, with its promise of redemption after industrialization's corruption of the landscape; when Moses looked back on his work, he evoked the passage of Isaiah 61:1-4 to describe the transformation: 'the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted ... to give unto them beauty for ashes ... [so that] they shall repair the ruined cities ...'¹² Used in this way, these

⁸ Berman, *All that is solid*, 298.

⁹ Mumford, "On Guard", 23.

¹⁰ Mumford, *City in History*, 619.

¹¹ See e.g. Moses, "From Dump to Glory".

¹² As quoted in Berman, "Robert Moses", 152.

metaphors attune the reader to the possibility of redemptive regeneration rooted in Biblical language (Isaiah) and more recent American symbolic culture (*Gatsby*).

The valley of the ashes has continued to be used as inspiration to frame urban renewal as heroic effort to turn a wasteland into a Biblical garden. When in the 2010s Willets Point, near the Flushing Creek, came under development, it was a moment for Mayor Bloomberg to draw on the symbolical significance of the site: ‘... The site was the inspiration for F. Scott’s Fitzgerald’s valley of the ashes, and it [p. 905 > p. 906] remains one of the city’s most polluted sites.’¹³ The reference to *The Great Gatsby* is also made in the planning department’s ‘historic resources’ section for the area.¹⁴ Here again, a positive implication of these metaphors is taken for granted. The promise of the ‘green breast’ has similarly continued to inspire planners. In a recent online reflection on New York’s waterfront development, the founder of an architecture firm working on several waterfront sites in New York invokes the final scene of *The Great Gatsby*, claiming that ‘[t]o chase a romanticized perspective for the urban waterfront is to neglect the reality that the great green breast of Manhattan is gone. The “wild promise” however, is not.’¹⁵

It was not only the suggestion of a second chance that inspired New York City planners, but also the significance that *The Great Gatsby* gives to this particular place in American cultural history, as a keystone against which efforts at environmental design can be set. In the opening pages of a little-known policy report, *Threatened City – A Report on the Design of the City of New York by the Mayor’s Task Force* (1967), which examines how one could ‘approach New York to judge it as an environment managed by man’¹⁶, a quote from the final lines of *The Great Gatsby* frames the report’s first case study. The vision is invoked here not as a vision for the future, but as a reminder of the past promises of greatness attached to this locale. *Threatened City*, as the title shows, comes

¹³ WNYC, “Mayor: Valley of Ashes.”

¹⁴ New York City, *Willets Point*.

¹⁵ Valgora, “New York’s East River.”

The ‘wild promise’ refers to the description of the city seen from the Queensboro bridge in *The Great Gatsby*.

¹⁶ New York City, *A Report*, 9.

at a time of increasing sense of crisis spurred on by rapid depopulation and deindustrialization.

Presented to Mayor Lindsay, the report introduces the ‘natural environment’ as ‘sick in ways which can only be treated by large-scale engineering and law enforcement’, and sets out to discuss, in particular, the flaws in urban design.¹⁷ It is notable that the view of southern Manhattan as ‘one of the most significant sites on earth’ (on the basis of Fitzgerald’s testimony) and the evocation of ‘man’s capacity for wonder’ in the quote from *the Great Gatsby*, in *Threatened City*, are related to an ideal of *civic* urban design, and this at a time when public investment in the infrastructure of New York City came under increasing pressure.¹⁸ For the authors, new civic constructions say ‘that imagination and desire for achievement [as expressed in the passage by *The Great Gatsby*] have died here, that New York no longer cares about itself.’¹⁹ The metaphor is used then, not to provide arguments for a proposed plan, but to hold up a past ideal (of civic urban design and cultural significance) against current practices. The positive implications of the vision at the end of the novel, however, remain.

In more recent years, the vision of the ‘green breast’ is still drawn upon – if not by planners, then by critics looking at contemporary planning – to express both the awe felt in the face of New York’s environment, and the admiration for human endeavours to mould the environment in their own image. In *Green Metropolis* (2016), Elizabeth Barlow Rogers – landscape designer and famous for her work as the first Central Park Administrator – searches for words to express her emotions as she walks the ‘High Line’, when the final lines from *The Great Gatsby* come to her mind.²⁰ After quoting them in full, she concludes: ‘And wasn’t the recovery of this forgotten industrial scrap of it four hundred years later something commensurate with our own capacity for wonder at the endurance of both human nature and human aspiration?’²¹ The reference to the ‘green breast’ is

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ See Gandy, *Concrete and Clay*, 52-59.

¹⁹ New York City, *A Report*, 11-12.

²⁰ Rogers, *Green Metropolis*, 202-203.

²¹ Ibid. 203.

applied [p. 906 > p. 907] here as a closing metaphor, summing up the argument of transformation of post-industrial city to ‘green metropolis’, and enabling a measure of closure and moral evaluation, much in the same way as it was for Robert Moses in his evocation of Flushing Meadow’s transformation.

But the metaphor had also become suspect. Catrin Gersdorf, in *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert*, sees reminiscences of *The Great Gatsby*’s final vision in Daniel Libeskind’s proposal for ground zero, but the implications are of gendered hubris. Gersdorf sees a plan which proposes that the ‘fresh, green breast of the new world’ (deemed a ‘regressive fantasy of patriarchal cultures’) ‘[be] finally transformed into the design of a phallic, green spire of the world’s most powerful nation, still busy conquering yet other real and imagined deserts.’²² The reference provides the final words for a book that also started out with a reference to the green breast in its introduction (which promises a confrontation between ‘America-as-fresh-green-breast’ and the idea of the desert)²³. Here, the metaphor becomes a vehicle for critiquing a plan for being constructed around a vision that (in the eyes of Gersdorf) has run its course.

The Green Breast and Eric Sanderson’s *Mannahatta*

The most persuasive recent vision for New York influenced by metaphorizations from *The Great Gatsby* – and a book that opens and ends with the vision of the ‘green breast’ – is Eric W. Sanderson’s *Mannahatta* (2009). While not the work of a planner – Sanderson is a landscape ecologist – the influence of the book’s vision on thinking of future New York can hardly be overestimated, especially in the wake of urgent concerns for the city’s resilience following hurricane Sandy (2011). The way Sanderson draws on the metaphor of the ‘green breast’ enables the author to look back at what is lost in the past, while simultaneously assessing the possibilities for future development. Published in 2009, it celebrates 400 years since the arrival of William

²² Gersdorf, *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert*, 13, 332.

²³ Ibid., 14.

Hudson on the shores of Manhattan, in 1609, and presents an elaborately wrought restoration of what was there before the Europeans arrived. It imagines what Manhattan must have looked like in ecological terms in 1609 and looks forward (in distinctively optimistic tones) to the city it could be in 2409.

Sanderson's *Mannahatta* project (website, exhibition, book) has received ample praise. And 131 years from publication, according to Kim Stanley Robinson's speculative novel *New York 2140*, Sanderson will be remembered in a future under-water New York as '[o]ne of the great New Yorkers.²⁴ But there have been some particularly critical academic reactions, summed up most comprehensively in 'Encountering *Mannahatta*' in *Cartographica*. The critique of Sanderson's book in *Cartographica* is closely linked to the book's rhetorics, its chosen perspective and imagined relationship with the environment, all of which converge in the metaphor of the green breast. Gillian Rose sums up the key issues at stake: 'the Eurocentrism that underpins traditional historical narratives; the feminization of "nature" as an object of sexual desire; the naturalization of top-down conceptions of landscape; the myth of the "original" natural landscape as ecological baseline; the decontextualization and romanticization of historical visions of nature'²⁵ – all elements that apply to Sanderson's book as a whole, as well as to the metaphorization of the landscape as 'green breast'.

Sanderson ends [p. 907 > p. 908] his book with a look 400 years forward, to 2409. At that point in time, he imagines, 'Manhattan will be back for all of us, a land as pleasurable as one can tread upon, a city that all the people have created ... the fresh, green breast of a world that will thrive for another four hundred years, and then some ...'²⁶ For this to happen, Sanderson imagines a future densification of the population, but also relocation in order to restore some of the land to nature.²⁷

²⁴ Robinson, *New York 2140*.

²⁵ Rose, "Visual Desires", 258.

²⁶ Sanderson, *Mannahatta*, 243.

²⁷ Ibid., 240-242.

Such solutions, Jeffrey Myers argues, draw on anti-urban tendencies in American culture, also in terms of race and multi-ethnicity in urban context. He notes that ‘[t]ellingly, the imagined green spaces and local farms that surround the imagined urban core of “Mannahatta” in 2409 are located in what are some of today’s most ethnically, racially, and economically diverse neighborhoods of Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx.’²⁸ For Myers, the ‘eco-pornographic fantasy of a “virgin” wilderness’ encapsulated in the green breast constitutes a myth that is ‘inextricable from that [traditional environment] movement’s traditional racial and ethnic exclusivity’.²⁹ Such criticism may sound ungenerous to *Mannahatta*, which did give considerable space to the perspective of the Lenape inhabitants of the island in 1609. But the fact remains that the image of the ‘green breast’, seen by Dutch sailors in *The Great Gatsby*, implies displacement and the reordering of the landscape and its population for the landscape to fulfil its promise – and it is notable that *Mannahatta* ends with the image of future displacement and remapping for the ‘green breast’ to thrive.

Re-reading the green breast

Important for unpacking the contradictory associations evoked by the metaphors from *The Great Gatsby*, that led Robert Moses, the urban task force authors of *Threatened City*, Sanderson, and others, to utilize them for an optimistic vision, and that let critics such as Rose and Myers to think them so inappropriate, is the discrepancy between a tradition of critical readings of the novel and the way in which metaphors from the novel have become symbolic currency in the public realm – and the tensions between dream and reality that are at the root of the novel itself.

To explore more fully the implications of drawing on Fitzgerald’s metaphors for how New York is planned and envisioned, we have to return to how the novel and its metaphorizations have been interpreted in literary and cultural studies during almost a century since its inception. These

²⁸ Myers, “Getting Back”, 65.

²⁹ Myers, “Getting Back”, 73, 71.

readings have remained largely absent from engagements with how the metaphor has been applied to planning and thinking of New York. One important point of reference is Louise Westling's *The Green Breast of the New World* (1996), a key publication in American ecocritical literary criticism. Westling's concerns anticipate many subsequent critical readings referred to already (notably those of Gersdorf, Myers, and Rose). She argues that the 'green breast' and its reverberations in American culture display a fetishist nostalgia for that which was destroyed by one's own acts, and construct a metaphorization in which guilt, gendered desire, and an aestheticized vision combine.³⁰ While I agree with this reading, it is important to note that the novel itself can be read as a powerful warning against nostalgic tendencies in American culture. Leo Marx, in one of the most important readings of the 'green breast' and [p. 908 > p. 909] its consequences for American cultural narratives, crucially argues that the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*, like Gatsby, is 'drawn to images of pastoral felicity, but he learns how destructive they are when cherished in lieu of reality.'³¹ The crucial difference between Nick and Gatsby is that the former knows the past cannot be repeated, let alone the mistakes of the past be undone. This is made most explicit in the dialogue between Nick Carraway and Gatsby halfway in the book, in which Gatsby dreams of returning to a long-gone moment of innocence and promise with the woman he loves.

Gatsby's desire to 'repeat the past' and to 'fix everything just the way it was before'³², questioned explicitly by the narrator, eventually runs its destructive course, destroying an innocent life, and Gatsby himself. But it is a desire that is fundamentally contradictory: to fix what was broken in the past, not in order to remake it, but to have the possibility to re-take it; to retrieve that imagined moment of innocence, not to be able to keep one's innocence, but to lose it again. In this light, the vision in the final lines of *The Great Gatsby* – and the desire to evoke it in the planning of New York – is profoundly disturbing: it professes a longing to be again in this imagined 'innocent'

³⁰ See Westling, *The Green Breast*, 5ff.

³¹ Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 363.

³² Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 117.

moment before the ‘deflowering’ of the landscape, not in order to have the possibility to refrain from (land)fall, but to have again the opportunity to fall, the possibility to fulfil the imagined potential of self and landscape, while now fully aware of the despoiling effect that will have on both.

Conclusion

Since their appearance in *The Great Gatsby*, the tropes of the ‘valley of the ashes’ – the dreadful nightmare of a pastoral landscape turned into a wasteland – and its counterpoint, the ‘green breast’, with its dream of a fresh start, have continued to haunt the planning of New York and its shores. During almost a century of planning New York, these metaphors have been adapted to fit a range of purposes, from early expansion (Moses’s parkways) and redevelopment (1939 fair) to more recent efforts at reframing the post-industrial city as green metropolis. But seen through the lens of *The Great Gatsby*, these tropes in planning also convey contradictory cultural meanings not necessarily intended: the destructive and disruptive impulses of the American dream, and the fraught pastoral gaze that continues to aestheticize the environment, lamenting its destruction while preparing it for renewed exploitation. Unlike what Moses, Bloomberg, Sanderson, and others, imply, the metaphors from *The Great Gatsby* remind us that past mistakes, lurking in the environment, cannot be redeemed – they have to be lived with.

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