Alumni Book Club: Tri-State Region Selection

Gotham Unbound by Ted Steinberg

8:00-9:00 PM ET on Tuesday, October 24th, 2023

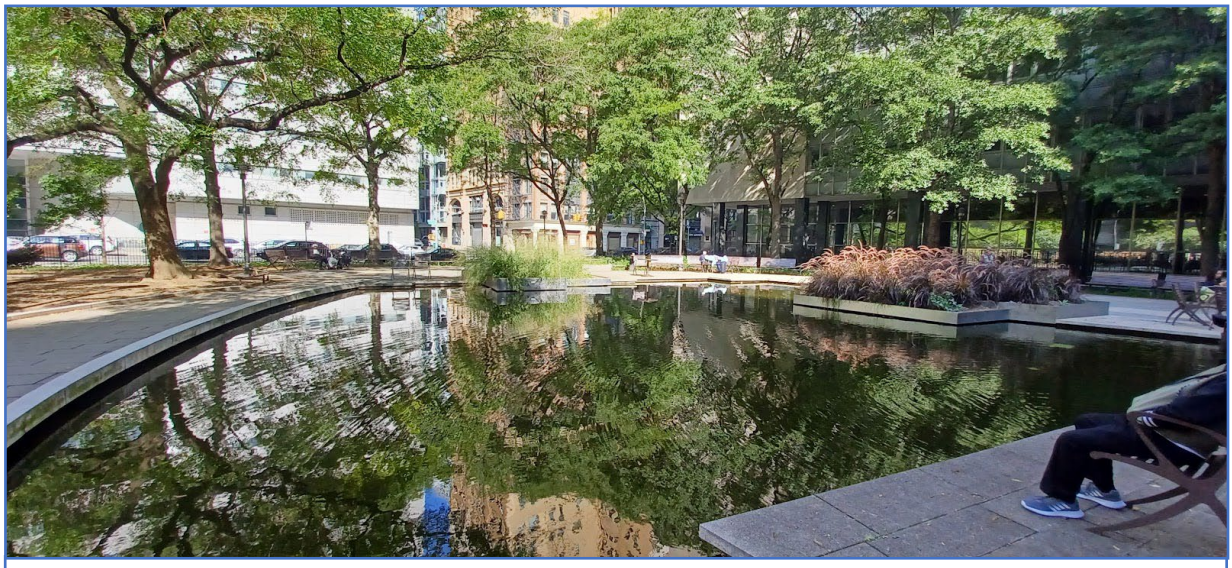
Meeting Schedule

Date	Chapters
10/24/23	**Part 2: The Great Transformation 1790-1920** Chapter 3: The Reticulation Chapter 4: Adventures in Drainage Chapter 5: The Revenge of Thomas Dongan Chapter 6: The Open Loop Chapter 7: The Exploding Metropolis Chapter 8: Two-Dimensional Gotham
11/7/23	**Part 3: Night Comes to the Marshes 1900-1980** Chapter 9: The Road to Hermitville Chapter 10: The Landscapers of Queens Chapter 11: The Wilds of Staten Island Chapter 12: The Massifs of Fresh Kills Chapter 13: The Great Hackensack Disappearing Act
	Note – we are skipping Thanksgiving Week
11/28/23	**Part 4: The Green Colossus (1960-2012)** Chapter 14: The Age of Limits Chapter 15: The Big Apple Biome Chapter 16: The Future of New York

Chapter 3

1. Despite its proximity to water, New York had few sources of drinkable fresh water in its surrounding area. When the Collect Pond was polluted and later drained, it caused a great deal of difficulty for residents as they were forced to look elsewhere for drinking water.

   How does this compare to our struggles with fresh water in other areas today?



The Collect Pond Park built on the site of the old Collect Pond and later the site of the notorious 5 Points neighborhood.

2. Early European settlers recognized that the areas around the Collect Pond and marshes could cause people to get sick from enduring the "nysom vapors."

   Were they correct? Does living near a marsh increase your chance of contracting some illnesses?

   How can you balance the ecological importance of those areas with the increased potential for disease transmission?

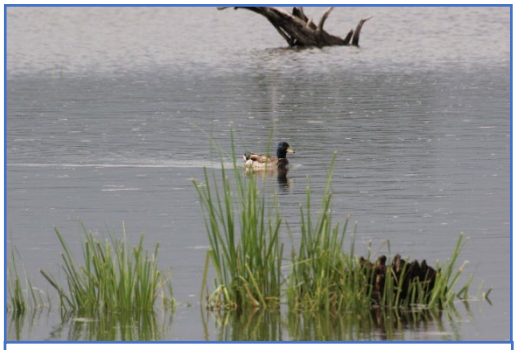
   Does what we are doing to the environment now increase the likelihood of spreading some of the same diseases? How does that affect your thinking about the last question?

Chapter 4

3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the grid pattern in Manhattan? How does it compare to the layout of streets where you live?

4. The Swartwout family tried and ultimately failed to drain the New Jersey Meadowlands, yet few marshes remain in the Hudson River Estuary. Now the Army Corps of Engineers wants to restore marshlands in the New York Area to improve water quality, support the native species of the area, and assist in flood control. As Egbert Ludovicus Viele put it on page 86, "Nature ever true to her laws maintains equilibrium… the evil (man) attempts to remove, reappears with greater force at another point."

   Are we better at striking a balance between man and nature than we were 200 years ago? Are we good enough?



The New Jersey Meadowlands. Part of the old cedar forest is still visible in this section.

Chapter 5

5. The transformation of southern Manhattan began with the Dongan Charter document. By the mid 1800's the burgeoning population, the merchant's quest for capital and the Dongan Charter helped to remake the New York landscape. "Treating land as a means of wealth accumulation had placed a premium on terra firma at the expense of the sea."

   Has anything like this happened in your area? If so, what were the results?

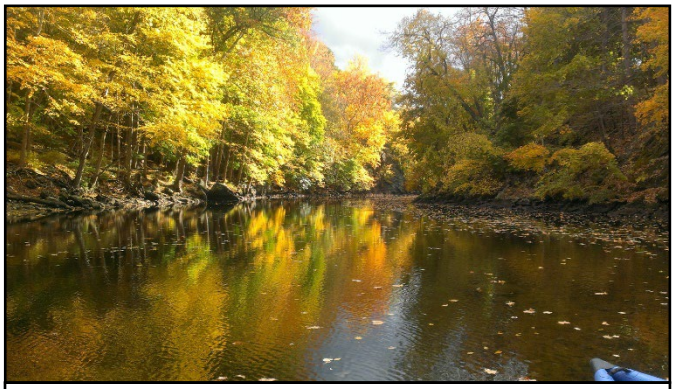
Governors Island - this flat area is all built on fill.

Chapter 6

6. The population explosion of New York in the 19th century affected the ecological environment in the following ways:

- overproduction of waste changed from a closed to open ecology network,
- creation of the Croton Aqueduct,
- eutrophication of the New York Harbor,
- loss of wetlands, and
- demand for water to meet new standards of hygiene.

   How does this compare to our struggles with overpopulation in other areas today?



The Croton River in Westchester County - an important part of New York's water supply.

7. This chapter details New York's struggles getting clean drinking water and disposing of sewage. As the population increased, the problems grew worse.

   How are clean drinking water and sewage disposal handled where you live? Do you feel like you have water security?

   After two centuries of scientific and technological advancement, what do we get right and what do we still get wrong?

Chapter 7

8. Much of New York's growth in the 19th century mirrored the US push westward called Manifest Destiny. This resulted in great cost to the surrounding environment and its original inhabitants.

   Is it possible to have large-scale growth without such destruction? Can you think of examples where we succeeded in growing so much without overtaxing the surrounding environment?

Chapter 8

9. The destruction of the oyster beds in New York Harbor and the surrounding waters helped cause an ecological catastrophe because the natural cleaning systems (oysters and salt marshes) of the waters were undermined. Oyster reefs also form a natural breakwater that helps to protect coastlines during intense storms. Today the Billion Oyster Project (https://www.billionoysterproject.org/) has already placed over 100 million oysters and is raising money to continue to their goal as the name suggests.

   Can you think of other instances where needed restoration of an ecosystem has come at great cost and effort?

10. The destruction of the Atlantic Menhaden population (we call them Bunker in New York) as well as the filling in of salt marshes also undermined the cleaning system of the river to create a kind of perfect ecological storm.

    Can you think of other perfect ecological storms that humans have unleashed?

11. When the Croton Aqueduct first came online, engineers had budgeted 40 gallons of water per person a day. The actual consumption was over twice that and both the water supply and the sewage system could not keep up.

    What other examples of overconsumption can you think of?

    About half of that demand was due to leaks that no one wanted to pay to fix. Do any of your examples have a similar problem where a flaw in the system no one wants to pay to fix makes the problem far worse?

The Croton Aqueduct once crossed into Manhattan on this bridge.