

Title: Not in my City: Rural America as Urban Dumping Ground

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Abstract:

The ideological divide between “urban” and “rural” is deeply rooted in the American consciousness, fraught with tensions stemming from false memories of a pastoral past on the one hand and the American yearning for progress as exemplified by the industry of the city on the other. These tensions have figured prominently in design discourse, from Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City to Patrick Geddes Rural-to-Urban Transect and Ian McHarg’s Design with Nature. Over the last twenty years, however, rural issues have been wholly overshadowed by design’s fixation on urbanization. Though urban design and planning are well established subdisciplines of the design professions, rural issues receive limited pedagogical or practical emphasis. Across design disciplines, the contemporary city is touted as the key to technological, economic and cultural innovation while rural decline is accepted as inevitable, if not necessary.

This resignation to the eventuality of rural decline has facilitated an exploitative relationship between urban hubs and their rural hinterlands. Rural America—which encompasses roughly seventy-two percent of the nation's landmass—has seen slower population growth for a decade as more young people move to urban and suburban areas for jobs and aging retirees seek out more densely populated places to live. The 2010 census revealed that non-metropolitan counties officially lost population for the first time. The economic landscape of rural America is also in a state of flux. Rural areas have traditionally relied upon resource-extractive industries, such as agriculture, forestry and energy production. However, technological advances, outsourcing, and the decline of manufacturing have forced rural communities to reevaluate their local economies. Declining populations coupled with limited economic opportunities characterize a number of rural communities across the United States. Looking for stable economic investments, policy makers and officials in rural areas across the country actively court landfills, prisons, and meat production and processing facilities in hopes of creating new jobs and generating revenue for towns in need of economic revitalization.

In the United States, Locally Undesirable Land Uses (LULUs) are increasingly being pushed out of cities and into rural areas. Though most city dwellers would agree that LULUs like power plants, factories, and hazardous waste storage facilities are necessary, most would prefer not to live near them. Though LULUs may offer significant benefits to society at large, they do so at the expense of neighboring communities. The siting of such unsavory land uses also typically exploits disadvantaged and unempowered populations and makes the rural-dumping ground paradigm particularly problematic. While the economic benefits of LULUs are largely unproven, the negative environmental and social consequences can be wide ranging. Landfills and livestock operations, for example, pollute land, air, and water resources, negatively impacting biodiversity and public health. As an out-of-sight-out-of-mind strategy, the geographic displacement of these ecologically and socially damaging systems enables relocation over reformation. By analyzing the geography and design of three of the most significant LULUs, meat production and processing facilities, landfills, and prison complexes, this study seeks to illuminate the extent to which unwanted urban land uses are impacting rural areas today.