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Martin V. Melosi

The Emerald City Was Not a Green City

Sustainable city researcher Timothy Beatley wrote:

People historically have perceived cities as destructive of nature, gray and nature-less, and separate from natural systems. Green urbanism is a movement that rejects that perception and argues that cities can be environmentally beneficial and restorative, can be full of nature, and are inherently embedded in complex natural systems. (2004, 619)

The concept of a green city—or green urbanism—is quite modern. Concepts like sustainability, or resilience, are often used in a definition of greenness, although there is substantial contention over the idea of what “the green city” actually might represent. Beatley went on to ask, “What, more precisely, does green urbanism do?” It can encourage city building “in harmony with nature,” and it can minimize the ecological footprint (619–620).

Historically, certain cities or urban places have exhibited some of those elements ascribed to “greenness.” Native American communities, while not cities in a conventional sense, often stressed compatibility between nature and human activity. But modern understandings of ecology, ecological science, and the global impacts of environmental change are necessary to design cities that are compatible with the natural world. Such types of knowledge only began to emerge in the West around the mid-twentieth century. Different times also call for different degrees of urgency.

An interesting example of the limited perspective on urban greenness in earlier eras is the portrayal of the Emerald City in L. Frank Baum’s children’s novel, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, first published in 1900. In this case, a literary work can help demonstrate how perceptions of cities and “greenness” at the turn of the twentieth century contrast with more modern environmental views.

Born in Chittenango, New York, in 1856, Baum was the son of a barrel-factory owner. He began his education at home, then attended Peekskill Military Academy, but dropped

out because of a health condition and never completed his schooling. He tried acting and writing for the stage, newspaper journalism, and business; however, he turned to writing for children in his forties. Baum published his first collection for young readers, *Mother Goose in Prose*, in 1897, followed by the top-selling *Father Goose, His Book*, in 1899. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* came out the next year, recounting the story of Dorothy Gale from Kansas, whose house is carried into the land of Oz by a tornado. In attempting to find her way back home, she joins forces with a scarecrow, a tin woodman, and a cowardly lion. Together, they journey to the Emerald City, the home of a great wizard whom they believe can fulfill their wishes. The journey is treacherous, especially because a wicked witch wants revenge on Dorothy, whose house fell on and killed the wicked witch's sister. According to one biography on Baum (AGE 2016), the book so captured children's imaginations that Baum went on to write several sequels and transformed the first book into a play for Broadway in 1902.

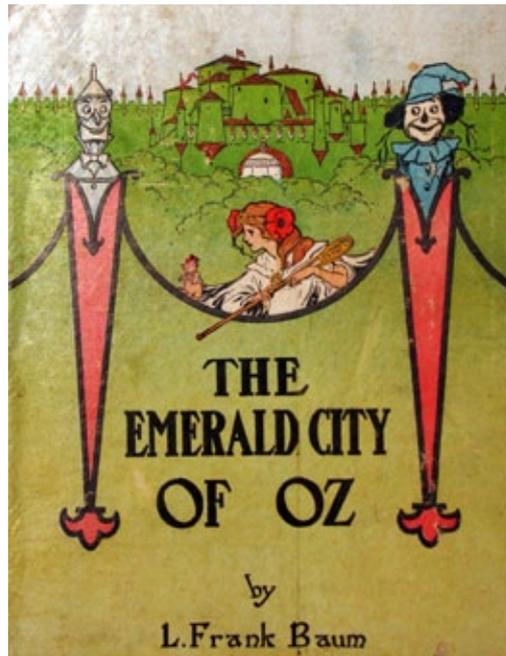
In the introduction to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, Baum explained why it was important to make children's stories more relevant to the times in which they were written, giving us a glimpse into his approach to writing the book. It also sheds light on why he drew upon his own knowledge of cities and "greenness" in his own time in placing the Emerald City at the center of his story. As he stated:

Folklore, legends, myths and fairy tales have followed children through the ages, for every healthy youngster has a wholesome and instinctive love for stories, fantastic, marvelous and manifestly unreal . . . Yet the old-time fairy tale, having served for generations, may now be classed as "historical" in the children's library; for the time has come for a series of new "wonder tales" in which the stereotyped genie, dwarf and fairy are eliminated, together with all the horrible and blood-curdling incidents devised by their authors to point a fearsome moral to each tale. Modern education includes morality; therefore the modern child seeks only entertainment in its wonder-tales and gladly dispenses with all disagreeable incidents. (1956, ix)

Though Baum added that his story was written "solely to please children of today," some adult readers many years later saw allegory behind the fairy tale. The best-known observation, "The Wizard of Oz: Parable on Populism," was written by New York high-school teacher Henry M. Littlefield for *American Quarterly* in 1964. Although Baum never lived in Kansas, his roots in the American Midwest were strong. His political support for pop-

ulist (and democratic) presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan, who supported farmers' rights and favored adding silver to the gold standard, ran deep.

Littlefield saw in Baum's work not just a fanciful fairy tale, but one that suggested an allegory of late nineteenth-century America driven by the populist cause of Midwestern farmers and their supporters. As a reform movement meant to improve the lot of farmers and their lifestyle, populism tended to criticize city life as anti-agrarian and antagonistic to the countryside. The rural-urban tensions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century are at the



Cover of L. Frank Baum's *The Emerald City of Oz* (Chicago, IL: Reilly & Lee Co., 1910). Illustrated by John R. Neill [public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.

heart of the book, its characters, and the various settings he describes—including the Emerald City. The power of the Emerald City was built on the fundamental hypocrisy of a place that only looked sparkling green because of the spectacles you wore. (This is reminiscent of “greenwashing” today; that is, marketing a product as environmentally friendly when it is not.) Baum on several occasions contrasted the city—with its power and wealth (and in some cases, its protection from the outside world)—with the hostile lands of the Wicked Witch of the West, the forest full of wild animals, and even dry and desolate Kansas itself. He portrayed the Emerald City as a safe haven (carefully planned) from a variety of external threats, suggested as uncontrollable Nature. This image does not explicitly parallel specific concepts of green urbanism, such as renewable energy, zero waste, water catchments, biodiversity, sustainable transport, good public spaces, and so forth, but it does suggest a parallel with a modern sustainable city as a community that is beneficial to humans, if not the environment per se.

Littlefield could not prove that Baum intentionally built this allegory behind the veil of the children's story, but his observations influenced numerous scholars, who found

the Littlefield assessment a very useful way to teach populism and nineteenth-century America in their classes. Historian Richard White (2016) has suggested a slightly different pathway for evaluating the book. In his view, Baum may have been more interested “in proposing an alternative to Populism,” with the Emerald City taking inspiration from Chicago’s White City, which Baum visited frequently. The White City of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition was composed of neoclassical buildings, illuminated by electricity, and filled with exhibits. Outside the gates, there was a midway where visitors could ride the world’s first Ferris wheel. The White City was a technical wonder and a consumer paradise, but not really a stand-in for what Baum described as a place that served as protection from the outside world. The glitz and glamour of the White City, however, was not unlike the Emerald City’s charms (White 2016, 868–71).

Dorothy was the everywoman from Kansas. The scarecrow, who sought a brain from the wizard because he felt inferior to others, represented the farmer. Baum portrayed the scarecrow as a bright, wily thinker with an inferiority complex. Carrying the allegory further concerning late nineteenth-century archetypes, the tin woodman was once human, but was bewitched and became an apparent hollow metal shell without a heart. The narrative shows time and again the compassion of the tin woodman—a product of industrial dehumanization. Littlefield viewed the cowardly lion as a frightened figure in the political jungle (in White’s view, perhaps populist William Jennings Bryan)—one who needed simply to regain the courage that had always been there in order to attain great leadership skills. This group represented a broad cross section of Americans beset by the oppressive economic and political powers of the industrial age. Littlefield found allegory in almost every aspect of the story, from the yellow brick road (the gold standard) that takes Dorothy and her friends to Oz, to the wicked witches (natural and governmental forces that threatened workers, farmers, and everyone else). The wizard himself—a former circus balloonist from Nebraska who also landed in Oz—is not “all-powerful,” but a charlatan with the skills of a Gilded Age politician (Littlefield 1964, 51; see also White 2016, 869–70, and Parker 1994).

When Dorothy and her friends arrive at the Emerald City, the Guardian of the Gates insists that they all put on green spectacles before he can take them to the wizard. “Why?” asked Dorothy. “Because if you did not wear spectacles the brightness and glory of the Emerald City would blind you . . .” the Guardian asserts (Baum 1956, 97). After putting on the glasses, they view streets lined with beautiful houses “all built of green marble

and studded everywhere with sparkling emeralds” (100). They see windows with green glass, a green-tinted sky, people dressed in green clothes—all having greenish skin. Oz later tells the group: “Just to amuse myself, and keep the good people busy, I ordered them to build this City, and my palace and they did it all willingly and well. Then I thought, as the country was so green and beautiful, I would call it the Emerald City, and to make the name fit better I put green spectacles on all the people, so that everything they saw was green” (161). The wizard’s equation of his city with the beauty of the green countryside is ostentatious and manipulative on his part. But that he makes the connection between city and country in terms of greenness is at least a faint reminder of modern green cities and their connection to all-encompassing Nature.

In his book *Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle* (2007), historian Matthew Klinge picks up on this theme of pretext and duplicity. One source for the title of his book, Klinge states, “is the imaginary metropolis of . . . *The Wizard of Oz*, and like the fictional city, Seattle’s allure has been its natural splendor . . . But the history of Seattle, like the history of the West, is not an enchanted romance . . .” (2007, 7). To Littlefield, the deception is wrapped up in the idea that the Emerald City is a substitute for the American nation’s capital—a distant government with no time for the problems of the little people (Littlefield 1964, 54). Some would say that the capital was awash in the pursuit of money—greenbacks if you will—as opposed to effective leadership. In a most cynical sense, some people today have touted the value of environmental sustainability as primarily having an economic value or intent. Unfortunately, sustainability as a concept has often been kidnapped by those with only a modest commitment to preserving the environment.

While presenting an image of brightness and greenness, but also linking the Emerald City to deception and greed, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* suggests how distant Baum’s representation of urban life was from the aspiration of green-city advocates today. There was little interest in substantive change and improvement, sustainable good practices, or attention to nonhuman preservation. The wizard’s own admission of trickery does contain an appreciation for “the green and beautiful” countryside, but transferred to the city as an illusion to pacify and impress his people. It is, at best, only concerned with the veneer of life, the surface beauty of the city.

There is no hint of an environmental ethic in Baum’s book, nor should we expect one. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, obviously, is not necessarily representative of nineteenth-

century thinking on greenness and cities; however, at the same time, it is more consistent with Beatley's observation that "[p]eople historically have perceived cities as destructive of nature, gray and natureless, and separate from natural systems" (2004, 619). Yet even Beatley's argument overstates the historical case about pre-World War II cities, where anti-smoke ordinances, sanitary reform, and park development were at the very least precursors to green city advocacy. The stark case of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is to illustrate a rather wide gap between thinking about the city and its possibilities to achieve greenness in the past, and the changing framework of recent years. The context and setting at the turn of the twentieth century were very different than today. Environmentalism was linked to resource conservation, or the wise use of resources for the benefit of humans. The modern environmental movement's focus on the intrinsic value of the natural world was a foreign idea then, save possibly John Muir's advocacy of preservation. The park movement in the cities, for example, was an attempt to bring Nature into the urban setting, not to transform the cities themselves to be more in line with natural rhythms. It is the contrast between Baum's view of the Emerald City and modern concepts of greenness that sheds light on both.

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