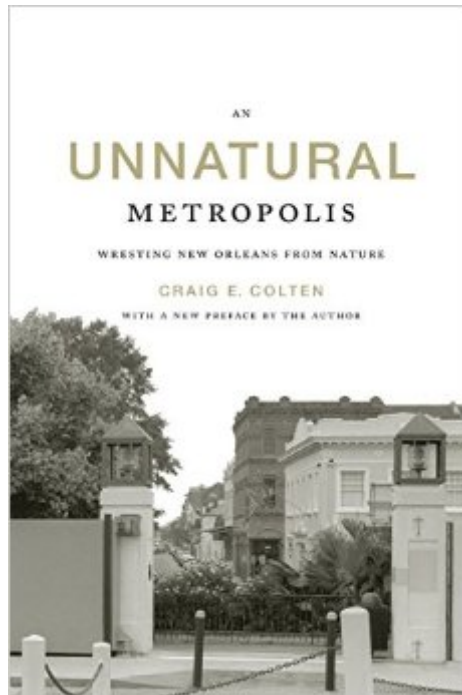


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An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans From Nature



Synopsis

Strategically situated at the gateway to the Mississippi River yet standing atop a former swamp, New Orleans was from the first what geographer Peirce Lewis called an "impossible but inevitable city." How New Orleans came to be, taking shape between the mutual and often contradictory forces of nature and urban development, is the subject of *An Unnatural Metropolis*. Craig E. Colten traces engineered modifications to New Orleans's natural environment from 1800 to 2000 and demonstrates that, though all cities must contend with their physical settings, New Orleans may be the city most dependent on human-induced transformations of its precarious site. In a new preface, Colten shows how Hurricane Katrina exemplifies the inability of human artifice to exclude nature from cities and he urges city planners to keep the environment in mind as they contemplate New Orleans's future. Urban geographers frequently have portrayed cities as the antithesis of nature, but in *An Unnatural Metropolis*, Colten introduces a critical environmental perspective to the history of urban areas. His amply illustrated work offers an in-depth look at a city and society uniquely shaped by the natural forces it has sought to harness.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Colten's "An Unnatural Metropolis" provides a wide ranging view of the environmental issues that New Orleans faces. Whereas we often tend to view civilization and the environment as two separate entities, one having negligible effects in the other's sphere of influence, Colten clearly establishes the crucial impacts of the lower Mississippi delta and the Crescent City on one another. The

strength of his work is not only in helping us perceive the myriad of problems, past, present, and future that besiege New Orleans, but also in showing their complexity and interconnectedness. Laying out a brief overview of the city's physical geography, to include the telling point that its poor site was acknowledged but built upon for strategic reasons anyway, Colten then explains how he is approaching the telling of this history. He does not seek to exclude political and economic factors, but informs us that his emphasis will be on the environment in and around New Orleans. To his thinking this was the prime factor in many of the issues encountered from the city's foundation to modern times. In the colonial years of the 18th century the prime activities of city pioneers, according to Colten, consisted of extending and raising levees along the riverfront (maintained by individual property owners) and figuring out how to drain the city whenever these levees were breached. As these issues were mitigated to some degree and the city's population increased in the subsequent years following a shift from European administration to that of the United States, other issues rose to the forefront.

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