

Stories of Sand: Living Landscapes in Panama City and its Hinterlands

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Sand is a constituent of almost all materials in the anthropogenic world, including roads, buildings, glass, clothing, pharmaceuticals, silicon chips and the very ground beneath our feet. Despite the importance of this underappreciated and overexploited resource, little attention is paid to the sedimentary structures that form both our built environment and the foundation of our socio-spatial relationships. This thesis employs urban political ecology as a conceptual framework to explore landscapes within Panama City as living archives of geosocial change. It uses sand as a vehicle to track physical mobilizations and the social processes they incur. Calling on three locales of land reclamation in Panama City from the early 20th century until today, namely 1) swamp infill to create residential space for international workers arriving to construct the Panama Canal, 2) land stabilization to delimit the boundaries of Panama City, and 3) contemporary coastal expansion in pursuit of modern ideals, this paper recounts histories of environmental transformation, infrastructural displacement, and development discourse embedded in anthropogenic landscapes.

Land Reclamation in Panama City, depicted on aerial imagery and greyscale, 1904-2024

