Scientific insights are sometimes found in the least likely places. For an ethnobiologist whose research focuses generally on the intersection of culture and biology, the city may seem like the last place to search for answers to complex questions surrounding the relationship between the social and the natural or the material and immaterial. Yet the archaeology of modern cities reveals a complex fabric of spaces whose emergence at the nexus of social and biological forces makes them ideal for examining their interaction. Such investigations are aided by a strong interdisciplinary approach that combines the more traditional study of material culture with the examination of the political ecologies that have shaped the urban landscape. Political ecology informs the work of scholars in a variety of disciplines who seek to transcend the former dichotomous worlds of nature and society in the hopes of forging a new understanding of the intersection of the material and immaterial (e.g., Bennett 2010; Beitl 2012; Collins 2008; Greenberg 2006; Uggla 2010). As the products of human hands, cities are nevertheless an assemblage of hydrologies, soils, animal and plant communities, and landscapes that, over time, develop their own unique ecologies. Using a variety of data sets –historical, material, biological– archaeologists investigating modern cities are able to chronicle both the establishment, and the unfolding changes, that shaped their emergent ecologies. The results provide a provocative comparison with the ideologies and abstract plans that went into the production of these cities.

My own research has focused extensively on the production of urban industrial spaces that often involved the purposeful incorporation of natural elements (Mrozowski 2006a). Cities such as Lowell, Massachusetts –the first planned industrial city in North America– were classic examples of the kinds of produced spaces conceptualized by urban theorists such as Henri Lefebvre (1991), David Harvey (2000) and Edward Soja (2010). These scholars have concentrated primarily on the role that Western capitalism has played in the production of urban spaces that are often arenas of conflicts involving both environmental and spatial injustice. What the archaeology of modern cities adds to this picture is empirical evidence of what can best be described as the pathologies of social inequality (Mrozowski 2006a, 2006b). Below, I briefly outline examples from Lowell, one of several cities where archaeology provides