

Review: *Silicon Valley and the Environmental Inequalities of High-Tech Urbanism*

Jason Heppler · reviewed by Rachel Ameen · H-Net Reviews, 2026

Nestled among the scenic foothills of the Santa Clara Valley countryside, Silicon Valley conjures images of garages, microchips, and venture capital, not land use fights or toxic groundwater. Jason Heppler's *Silicon Valley and the Environmental Inequalities of High-Tech Urbanism* corrects this oversight. Covering the changing Santa Clara Valley from 1950 to 1990, Heppler shows that beneath the region's rise as a tech capital lay fierce contestation over landscape: who shaped it, who enjoyed it, and who bore its environmental costs. Stanford planners and San Jose boosters sold a vision of "clean industry" nestled among orchards and rolling hills. White suburbanites fought to preserve that pastoral ideal, and lifestyle it afforded for wealthy homeowners. Meanwhile, Latinx and working-class residents faced polluted water, displacement, and exclusion from the countryside aesthetic and tech-driven economic boom.

Heppler organizes the book chronologically across six chapters, each anchored by a different set of actors and conflicts. The beginning chapters establish how Stanford University and San Jose's city government shaped postwar development. Stanford opened its vast land holdings, developing a shopping center, industrial park, and high-end housing while enforcing strict design standards to maintain a pastoral aesthetic. To the south, San Jose expanded rapidly under city manager Dutch Hamann, who campaigned to aggressively annex nearby farmland and rural communities at a breakneck pace. The city swelled, but the gains were distributed unequally: new suburbs for white homeowners, environmental hazards for Latinx and working-class communities on the periphery.

Subsequent chapters turn to the residents who pushed back against unchecked and unequitable urban growth. White homeowners had bought into the promise of orchard-adjacent living; when subdivisions crept closer, they organized to slow development, defending countryside aesthetics while simultaneously distaining the "largely Latinx farmhands and their mingling with suburban property" (p.61). Those workers and their families, concentrated in the valley's eastern barrios, their own environmental battles: inadequate public services, displacement by highway projects, and exclusion from the suburban dream and wealth generated by the booming tech industry. Various community service organizations channeled these grievances into voter registration drives and political action. Meanwhile, conservationist groups professionalized the opposition to sprawl, moving from neighborhood meetings to legislative lobbying and litigation. By the 1970s, women leaders had reframed environmental debates around suburban quality of life issues: taxes, municipal services, and conservation. Environmentalists built coalitions that toppled pro-growth incumbents, enshrining the pastoral value of the valley.

The final chapter centers on chemical pollution, beginning with the 1981 discovery that Fairchild Semiconductor had been leaking carcinogenic solvents into the groundwater beneath the Great Oaks neighborhood of San Jose. Local outrage followed the discovery, led by local mothers who noticed a pattern of miscarriages, birth defects and high rates of cancer in their children. For decades, boosters had sold the valley's tech industry as clean: no smokestacks, no slag heaps, just tidy campuses among the hills. The Fairchild leak shattered that image. Subsequent investigations revealed contamination across the valley, and the EPA designated 29 superfund sites throughout the region. Residents organized through the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition to demand accountability. The image of “clean” tech “referred to how industry looked, not how it operated.” (p130).

Throughout his work, Heppler draws on local archives, newspapers, and organizational records to reconstruct how ordinary residents understood and contested the valley's transformation. The book is at its best when Heppler zooms in on specific fights and the people who waged them. His account of Alviso, a small community absorbed by San Jose in 1968 with promises of improved services that never materialized, captures how annexation worked as a tool of environmental inequality: saddling peripheral neighborhoods with sewage plants and flood risk while resources flowed to wealthier districts.

Equally compelling is his treatment of the valley's environmental organizations, which ranged from the white suburban led Committee for Green Foothills, conservationists who conducted studies and lobbied legislators, to La Confederación de la Raza Unida, which linked environmental exclusion to housing discrimination. Organizations like California Tomorrow pushed for regional planning coordination, while student radicals in Grass Roots tied ecology to antiwar and labor politics. Heppler shows how these groups sometimes worked in parallel, sometimes at cross-purposes, and rarely bridged the racial and class divides that shaped who got to define the valley's environmental priorities.

Where the book falters is in its conclusion. Heppler ties together his Silicon Valley narrative effectively, but stops short of drawing out its broader implications for environmental history. The valley was supposed to be a model for Western development: clean industry, suburban amenities, the postwar good life. What does its failure to deliver on that promise tell us about other Sun Belt metros, other tech corridors, other attempts to reconcile growth with livability? Heppler gestures at these questions but doesn't fully reckon with what the valley's experience reveals about those challenges elsewhere.

These reservations aside, Silicon Valley and the Environmental Inequalities of High-Tech Urbanism is a valuable contribution to urban environmental history. Heppler makes a convincing case that the Valley's landscape—designed, contested, and unequally experienced—deserves as much attention as its tech economy and circuit boards. At a moment when mass layoffs, new AI technology, and shifting corporate priorities have unsettled the industry's triumphalist narrative, Heppler's history of boosterism and its limits feels particularly timely. The book will appeal to scholars of the postwar

American West, suburban politics, and environmental justice.