

BOOK REVIEW

Subterranean Twin Cities

Greg Brick, 2009. Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 227 p., ISBN 978-0-8166-4597-8, 6 × 9 inches, softbound, \$18.95.

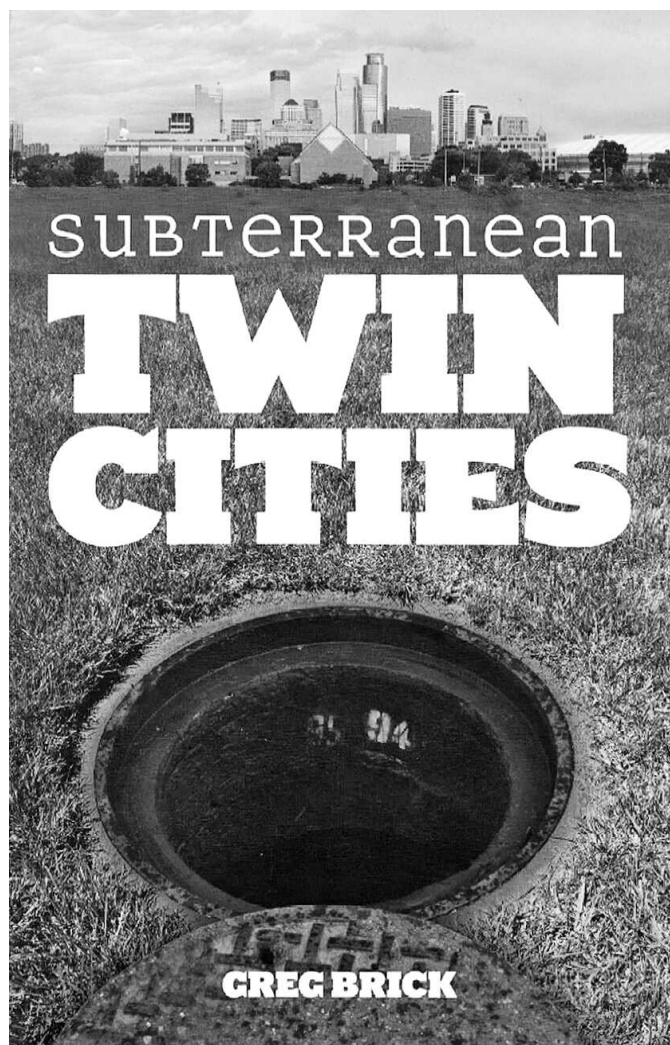
Geologist and long-time NSS member Greg Brick has written a delightful and witty book on the underground spaces found in the Twin Cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota, which include both man-made and natural caves. Part adventure memoir, part geology text, and part local history, this book is a valuable account of how caves in this predominantly sandstone area were formed (and made), how they were utilized for industries such as tourism, brewing, mushroom growing, cheese production, and sand mining, and how these spaces became important parts of the urban infrastructure, serving as conduits for water, sewerage, and other utility systems. It is an important, though often neglected topic, as caves have increasingly been integrated into the built environment. The author gives the readers pause as he challenges them to think more broadly about caves and their role in contemporary America. After reading this book, no one will hold onto the false idea that caves are only to be found in rural or wilderness areas.

It is also a darn good tale. Brick relates harrowing stories of urban exploration under the city streets that both fascinate and revolt the reader. It is a form of caving that few people have undertaken. Brick's rich descriptions of his often surreptitious experiences, especially in the sewers of St. Paul, will leave most readers willing to contemplate urban underground spaces only from afar. Well written, and well produced, this book contains many archival photographs that add visual depth to the text. The addition of a few contemporary photographs, especially of some of the nightmarish spaces Brick describes, would have further enhanced the work, as would a map of the Twin Cities showing some of the subterranean spaces featured in the text. The exclusion of the latter is understandable, though, as Brick notes that exploration of some of the spaces is quite dangerous. It is illegal to enter some, and many others are now closed. This is not intended as a guidebook.

Nor is it a scholarly work in the ordinary sense. Although deeply grounded in geological and historical research, it is episodic in organization and has no central thesis. Scholarly notation (e.g., footnotes or endnotes) is lacking, though some sources are identified in the text. The book does include a bibliography. The author references other works on urban underground spaces in his introduction but seldom returns to that literature or attempts to place his work in the field. In general, the

book focuses on the local. Thus, the larger context is absent; and how this study relates to the larger history of American caves or urban history is not explored. But this is small criticism, because as the Press description notes, this is a work of regional and local interest, not a scholarly monograph. As such, it works very well and deserves wide readership.

One of Brick's major innovations is his attention to the similarities and differences between caves intentionally made by humans, and those whose creation was inadvertent, formed for example through piping related to leaks in wells and sewers, which he calls anthropogenic. Many scholars already use anthropogenic to refer to artificial caves, but highlighting these differences and the key question of intent is a valuable insight. Other important topics in the book include the impact of railways on urban topography, especially the ravines and streams of St. Paul, and the re-engineering of natural streams below ground as a solution to competing land uses. Future scholars will use



this work for case studies to help build larger interpretive models of the history of the urban environment.

The book has much to recommend it. Merely relating what the author knows of the history, geology, and caves of the area would have been an important achievement, while a memoir only relating his personal experiences

exploring the urban underground would have been an exciting adventure tale. Here, we have it all in a single work.

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