



[Country Club Golf Course, Pittsburgh](#), W. Eugene Smith [Object 1985.268]



[Asbury Park, NJ](#), Joe Maloney [Object 2017.0704.04]

Artist: W. Eugene Smith
Date: circa 1956
Medium: Gelatin silver print
Classification: Photograph
Object: 1985.268

Artist: Joe Maloney
Date: 1979
Medium: Dye transfer print
Classification: Photograph
Credit Line: Gift of Susan and Peter MacGill
Object: 2017.0704.04
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Teaching guide by Jeffrey Adams, PhD student in English

W. Eugene Smith's *Country Club Golf Course, Pittsburgh* (circa 1956) and Joe Maloney's *Asbury Park, NJ* (1979) each capture an image of a golf course, albeit a miniature golf course in the case of Maloney's photograph. While all golf courses are recreational sites, they are also landscape design projects that employ natural and artificial materials, alter ecosystems, and require constant ecological intervention in order to maintain. Smith's and Maloney's photographs also make for a provocative pairing because both were taken as part of larger photographic series documenting a specific place and time, and so their depictions of golf courses necessarily capture different cultural, economic, and racial histories.

Teaching Guide Golf Course Photographs

W. Eugene Smith's *Country Club Golf Course, Pittsburgh*



W. Eugene Smith made *Country Club Golf Course, Pittsburgh* during his first assignment for Magnum picture agency in 1955, when he was tasked with taking one hundred photographs of Pittsburgh during a three week span for Stefan Lorant's book celebrating Pittsburgh's bicentennial. Instead, Smith took roughly 20,000 photographs of the city over the course of three years. Smith said that his Pittsburgh photographs were an attempt to capture "[t]he city as a living entity with it being an environment for—and in turn, an environment being created by—the people who give it heart and pulse" (78). In retrospect, Smith regarded his Pittsburgh photographs to be his best works, and he wanted to turn them into a book, but he was never able to follow through with this plan. His project, as he understood it, was to record Pittsburgh's disparate economic conditions as the city slowly molted out of its industrial past during the mid-20th century.

Representative of this, "Country Club Golf Course, Pittsburgh" captures a highly manicured golf course that, given when it was taken, was most

likely kept pristine through massive applications of pesticides, fertilizers, and water. While the photograph depicts a privileged space for the economically elite, other photographs in Smith's Pittsburgh collection document factory pollution, industrial labor, the everyday lives of the city's working poor, the changing cityscape, and much more. Smith writes that while photographing Pittsburgh he was observing "[t]he long squat belching of its industries, the blemish of its slums, and how at times both have given way to the cleanliness of cared for greenery in newly built parks close by newly constructed buildings" (Stephenson 36). Smith professed to want to capture Pittsburgh's complexity and study its existence as an organism.

Golf was a recreational activity primarily for Pittsburgh's economic elite during the 1950s, but the class status of golf in the United States was also shifting. In 1954, the U.S. Open was televised nationally for the first time, creating broader interest in the sport. The same year saw Arnold Palmer, a working-class native of the small city of Latrobe (just outside of Pittsburgh), claim the sport's amateur title and subsequently turn pro. By the time that Smith took his photo, Palmer had become the sport's most popular player and cultural figurehead, inspiring legions of fans to take up the game. As golf shed some of the elite status it had held before the mid-20th century, courses proliferated across the United States. Since the 1950s, the number of golf courses in the United States and in the world have grown each year. As of 2024, there are nearly 40,000 golf courses in the world, 78% of which are in just nine countries. As of 2024, nearly 50% of all golf courses are located in the United States.

The creation of golf courses tends to produce significant ecological harms, and this was especially true in the United States in the mid-twentieth century, before protective environmental legislation had been passed. Large swathes of land had to be cleared and graded to build a golf course, which, in a temperate biome like Pittsburgh's, tended to require cutting down forests and filling in wetlands. Replacing existing flora with a monoculture of grass or grasses also diminished biodiversity. Critics of

W. Eugene Smith's *Country Club Golf Course, Pittsburgh* cont.

golf courses, in the 1950s and today, point out that the land they require could be used for affordable housing or for nature preserves. Instead, golf courses create purely recreational landscapes that also require constant, ecologically harmful upkeep in the form of fertilization, irrigation, and pesticide-spraying. Smith's photograph thus documents forms of pollution and intensive resource use that are less immediately visible though perhaps no less pernicious than the factory pollution that plagued Pittsburgh during its industrial boom.

In the early twenty-first century, as golf has come under greater public criticism for its ecological impacts and as global climate change has exacerbated those impacts (especially in arid regions of the southwestern United States), the ecological footprint of golf has been shifting. Many contemporary golf course designers have begun to experiment with native and drought resistant plantings, as well as to target already ecologically damaged and polluted sites, such that the transformation of the site into a golf course represents an ecological improvement. Some course owners have also stopped irrigating and using fertilizers and pesticides, while others have been at the forefront of efforts to conserve species of native trees under attack from invasive pests. Urban golf courses and country clubs in the United States, like the one depicted in Smith's photograph, often double now as nature preserves, which affords them governmental protections as well as forces them to abide by certain environmental standards. In some cases, failing urban and waterside golf courses have also been fully converted into nature preserves, in effect conserving lands for wildlife that likely would have been developed for other human uses had golf courses never been built on them.

Artist Background

W. Eugene Smith (1918-1978) was an American photographer who is known for his work developing the photo essay as a genre. Smith began his career as a photojournalist and worked most prominently as a war photographer for *Life* during World War II. After working with *Life*, Smith began a career as a freelance photographer which began with his never completed Pittsburgh Project. His last major photo essay was called *Minamata* (1975), which focuses on the disfigurement and other negative health effects of people living in a Japanese fishing village as a result of mercury poisoning.

Joe Maloney's *Asbury Park, NJ*



In “Asbury Park, NJ,” the photographer Joe Maloney shows a miniature golf course with a ferris wheel and other amusement park features lying behind it. The course is covered with artificial turf and palm trees, a thick fog or mist fills the atmosphere, and people can be seen playing golf in the background. While miniature golf existed in the early decades of the twentieth century, the 1950s saw an explosion in its popularity as a family amusement in the United States, roughly coinciding with the aforementioned expansion of traditional golf's popularity. Maloney's 1979 photograph thus captures a middle-class entertainment that would have been a familiar sight at any American shoreside vacation city at the time.

One way to discuss Maloney's photograph through an ecological frame is to consider what kinds of commentaries it makes on, and

affective stances it invites towards, what it depicts, in light of the ecological impacts that mass seasonal tourism produced on New Jersey's beach ecosystems over the course of the middle decades of the twentieth century. Amongst the earliest oceanside areas in the United States that were developed in the late nineteenth century for tourism, the Jersey Shore—especially the northernmost portion of it where Asbury Park is located—was already well known in the early decades of the twentieth century for its boardwalks, summertime crowds, and amusement complexes. This development, much of which was sited on top of the region's biodiverse sand dunes, was further fueled by the creation of the Garden State Parkway in 1947, which massively expanded automobile tourism to the northern shore and also negatively impacted air quality throughout it. Though Maloney's photograph locates haunting beauty in this overdeveloped and almost surreal landscape, it also accentuates the incongruity of the landscape's human-made structures and artificial (not to mention, biome inappropriate) trees through its use of color and framing. Though the miniature golf course in the photograph is located only steps from the ocean (the ferris wheel in the background was adjacent to the beach), the ocean is not visible in the photograph. Maloney's other photographs of Asbury Park from this era often directly juxtapose the vibrant, almost garish, colors of seaside architecture, amusement sites, and fashions with the more muted colors of the ocean, air, and sand.

As global climate change makes seaside towns like Asbury Park more ecologically vulnerable because of rising sea levels and intensified weather events, images of their earlier commercial development can also look, in retrospect, like hubris. On October 29, 2012, Asbury Park was flooded and much of its waterfront development badly damaged and inundated with sand when tropical cyclone Sandy made landfall there. The damage from Sandy, along with the aging architecture and largely abandoned industrial sector of the city, has led to a significant portion of the city's properties being

Joe Maloney's *Asbury Park, NJ* cont.

classified as brownfields. In addition to large amounts of asbestos and other environmental hazards in aging residential buildings, the abandoned industrial sites are contaminated with heavy metals and with toxic chemicals like polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons. The city received \$500,000 in federal funding in 2022 to begin remediation efforts at some of these brownfields.

Many of Asbury Park's brownfields are located away from waterfront areas, in the city's less affluent West Side, whose population historically was predominantly Black. This is relevant context, too, for contemplating the kind of environmental history that Maloney's photograph of an East Side business captures. For all of the damage that Asbury Park's East Side developments did to seaside ecosystems in the twentieth century, those developments amounted to a financial opportunity that was unequally shared by the city's Black residents, most of whom were living around and among the toxic industrial sites now classified as brownfields. Between 1945 and 1970, Blacks were not only segregated to Asbury Park's West Side through redlining practices but also prevented from holding jobs at many East Side businesses, whose owners tended exclusively to hire White teenagers from surrounding suburbs. Federal and state investment in Asbury Park's oceanfront infrastructure also largely benefited those areas' more affluent, predominantly White residents and business owners.

Tensions over Asbury Park's systemic and structural racism came to a head less than a decade before Maloney took his photo of an East Side miniature golf business. From July 4-10, 1970, Asbury Park's young Black residents led a civil disturbance, mainly in the West Side neighborhoods where they lived. Though the unrest began with teenagers throwing bottles and trash at passing cars, it evolved into a more targeted and explicitly political protest. Following incidents of property damage and looting, a mandatory curfew was imposed, and law enforcement presence in the city increased. The situation escalated into physical violence, and although no one was killed, over 180 were injured, 46 of

them when police officers opened fire on a crowd of Black residents whom they feared would riot. Given that these events occurred during the July 4th holiday, White vacationers were quietly enjoying their beach trips on the East Side while this violence was unfolding on the other side of town.

Maloney took his photograph of an East Side miniature golf course in Asbury Park as part of a series, in which he sought to document the social life, the fashions, and the economic divides evident in the city in 1979 and 1980. Several photographs from the series document nightlife and youth culture, and they collectively make evident not only the ongoing social segregation of the city along racial lines but also its ongoing geographic segregation along racial lines. Given that Asbury Park's predominantly White-owned East Side entertainment businesses like the miniature golf course in Maloney's photograph were critical actors in sharpening the city's racial divide historically, that history becomes more available through the photograph when it is contemplated in the context of the larger series of which it forms a part. It also makes the photograph more readily available to analysis through an environmental justice lens, a lens that asks one to examine the extent to which unequally suffered environmental harms converge with and reinforce other kinds of social and systemic inequities.

Artist Background

Joe Maloney (1949-) is an American photographer who is known for his work towards making color photography a respected artistic medium. Maloney was a member of New York's well known LIGHT Gallery, which was the first art gallery that exclusively sold and promoted contemporary photography. Much of Maloney's work captures life in the United States.

Discussion Questions

- How does knowing the history of cities such as Pittsburgh and Asbury Park change our perspectives on these photographs? How can historical and geographical context open up images that, at first sight, do not seem to be of political importance? Can you think of other examples where an image's context opens up new avenues for thinking about the picture itself?
- Smith's photograph is of a full-size golf course while Maloney's represents a miniature golf course. How can differences in these courses help us think about them as ecological entities? What is "artificial" in each of these photographs versus what is "natural"? Do terms such as "artificial" and "natural" seem imprecise for talking about these golf courses? Why or why not?
- How are natural resources also economic resources? In what ways do these photos show this?

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