On February 15th, 1968, Kelvin Tyrone Mack, at the time a resident of the Kenilworth neighborhood in Northeast Washington, DC, perished in a fire that started at the Kenilworth Municipal Dump. The seven-year-old child had been playing with his friends when they were caught in the afternoon blaze; his two companions escaped with only minor injuries. During the decade spanning 1958 to 1968, residents of the nearby Kenilworth Courts public housing complex had clamored for the dump to be shut down. Every afternoon, city sanitation workers poured fuel in the dump and burned as much refuse as possible. The prevailing winds carried ash, smoke, and lighter pieces of trash to the doorsteps and windowsills of residents of Kenilworth Courts.

Although the metropolitan region’s sanitation engineers had been in favor of closing the dump since July of 1967, citing “the mantle of smoke from smoldering refuse,” and “the problems associated with filth, rats, and vermin,” at the site, it took the death of a young child in February of 1968 for the City of Washington to finally close the dump. Of course, the District of Columbia had long dragged its feet, and when asked by residents of Kenilworth Courts and metropolitan sanitation engineers why it delayed in closing the dump, cited concerns about the lack of incinerator space in the rest of the city.

In successfully pressuring the City of Washington to close the dump in the wake of Mack’s death, the region’s sanitation engineers invited a new public health problem into the Kenilworth neighborhood. The engineers decided to transform what was once a blighted and odious section of Northeast DC into a model demonstration for dump reclamation. In other words, the engineers hoped to build a park. To do so, they decided to cart hundreds of tons of incinerator ash—some of it still smoldering—to the old dumpsite, in order to landscape and grade the space while covering the remaining refuse. The first site selected for the incinerator ash was just a few hundred feet from the Kenilworth Courts public housing complex.

So, after contending with smoke and ash that would “burn through the night like a volcano,” as one neighborhood resident put it, Kenilworth Courts residents would soon find themselves next to a former landfill reclaimed and refashioned into a large urban park. However, in its final form, the park clearly did not suit the needs of the nearby residents. A tree line obscures the public housing complex from the rest of the park and blocks residents’ access. A chain link fence runs around the perimeter of the Aquatic Gardens to the north, and the absence of sidewalks and a gated entrance blocks all vehicles except cars from entering. The nearby residents, who suffered from the smoke and soot of the nearby dump, also received a reduction in waste collection in the late-1970s, as the city contended with mounting garbage and the loss of the Kenilworth landfill, which had once been the main receptacle for the District of Columbia’s garbage.
The case of Kenilworth Courts, and the failure of municipal planners and sanitation engineers to bring about “decent, safe, and sanitary” conditions reveal the lasting legacy of high modernist planning in the metropolitan landscape. The job of deciding how to operate the dump, when to close it, and what to turn it into fell to a committee of sanitation engineers from the region, none of whom lived in the Kenilworth neighborhood. The decision of where to build public housing fell to the National Capital Housing Authority, which sought cheap, open, and buildable land for public housing construction. The needs and concerns of the local residents who bore the brunt of the environmental burdens of the neighborhood were hardly taken into consideration. Kenilworth Park and the attached Aquatic Gardens might seem innocuous, but in fact they are the vestiges of undemocratic planning, and were spurred in large part by an avoidable tragedy. The park is built on decades of refuse from more prosperous parts of the District of Columbia, visually representing the decades of environmental that Kenilworth residents had been made to endure, on behalf of the rest of the City of Washington.