



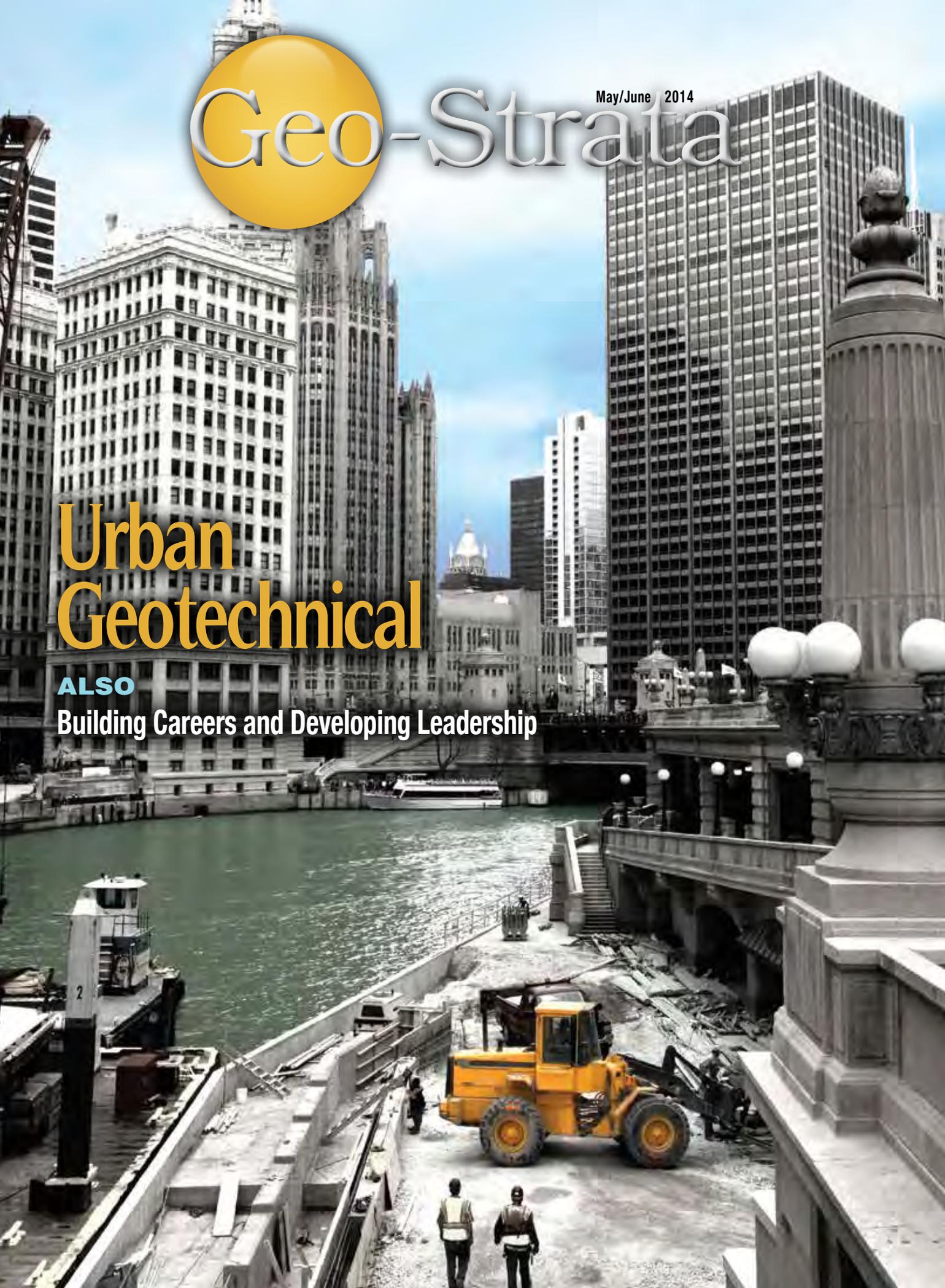
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English: It Ain't What It Used To Be

I've been accused of being a hidebound traditionalist when it comes to American English; someone who wants to freeze the language in time. Not true. I understand that, for better or worse, language evolves. But what's better and what's worse? I'm not sure, although I do have a few opinions, starting with a word you're familiar with: Landfill. What a great word! It's rugged and – yes! – clean (especially when it's a "sanitary landfill"). When I was growing up, we had "dumps," which seemed accurate enough and probably still is used to connote an uncontrolled waste disposal area.

I'm not as enthused about the switch to NO EXIT. DEAD END seemed so much more direct. NO EXIT could almost be the caption for Munch's "The Scream." Bottom line: Either designation discomferts me. I avoid such roads no matter what they're called.

I confess that I dislike "explosive device" and "atomic device"; either is dishonest. Face it: Saying "Didja hear they found an explosive device in the movies?" is one thing. Saying "They found a BOMB in the movies" is another. One is bureaucratically clinical; the other is downright scary. It should be. Ditto: "North Korea has an atomic device."

Probably the most ingenious "evolution" has been the removal of "bl" from "gamble" and "gambling"; thus "game"

and "gaming," the latter two connoting good-old-fashioned fun; the former two conjuring an image of windowless casinos, cigarettes, and cheap booze; more or less what exists. Do "game" and "gaming" – like "explosive device" – comprise a dishonest masking of the words' original intent? Not really. They're designed to counter gambling's old image, rooted in black-and-white tough-guy movies that premiered when gambling was immoral and illegal; something done surreptitiously, unless you invested in the stock market. Today, gaming is enthusiastically encouraged by state governments and various American Indian tribes, especially to subsidize school lunches. (Wow: Gaming is actually a form of altruism! Who knew?)

A lot of our language's recent evolution occurred because of efforts to replace sexist designations, words and phrases that have no place in the lexicon of societies like ours, where gender bias is frowned upon and, in some cases, illegal. That's why we don't have "draftsmen" any more. Instead, we have "drafters" or, as some prefer, the ungainly "draftspersons." Similarly, chairmen have surrendered their gavels to "chairs" (which still sounds weird to me), while "waiters" and "waitresses" have been replaced by "waiters" (the neutered male form) or – better – "servers." Actors and actresses, like waiters and waitresses, have adopted the unmanned "actors," probably because "players" – akin to "servers" – could be confused with people who like to game.

I don't know why "stewards" wasn't used to connote the men who first started roving airliners' aisles alongside stewardesses. Of course, even if it had been, we likely still would have adopted "flight attendants" to mean either.

Some occupations are so closely associated with a given gender we've had to come up with new terms altogether, even though the old terms were not sexist. Consider "secretaries." That's strictly a female thing, it seems to me (except maybe for some U.S. presidential cabinet positions), while "administrative assistants" tends to be gender-neutral. Somewhat refreshingly, however, "nurse" is no longer a female thing, which is why we no longer have to say "male nurse."

Somewhat ironically, at the same time that we began performing sex-change operations on our language, the procedures became "gender-reassignment surgeries." And then, while we were at it, we changed "janitor" to "custodian," morphed "home economics" into "family and consumer science," and swapped "vintage apparel" for "used clothing."

I remember when "dope addicts" became "druggies," which I don't necessarily regard as an improvement. The good news is that none of these folks "do drugs" anymore. Now, they self-medicate.



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I also remember "bums," "hoboes," and "tramps." Today they are the homeless, a far better term, I believe, especially so because it includes the homeless families – moms, dads, and kids – who live in their cars or wherever else they can, or have to. At one time, that was in a "ghetto," a noun first used in Venice, Italy to designate an area where an ethnic minority was required to live. In the U.S., the noun spawned the adjective "ghetto," but not for long: Today, it's "urban."

I can also recall certain words and phrases that have disappeared altogether, like the two words used to indicate a piece of writing was over. So, just for old times' sake...

THE END

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