



Asbestos and Fire: Technological Tradeoffs and the Body at Risk

Rachel Maines

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For much of the industrial era, asbestos was a widely acclaimed benchmark material. During its heyday, it was manufactured into nearly three thousand different products, most of which protected life and property from heat, flame, and electricity. It was used in virtually every industry from hotel keeping to military technology to chemical manufacturing, and was integral to building construction from shacks to skyscrapers in every community across the United States. Beginning in the mid-1960s, however, this once popular mineral began a rapid fall from grace as growing attention to the serious health risks associated with it began to overshadow the protections and benefits it provided.

In this thought-provoking and controversial book, Rachel Maines challenges the recent vilification of asbestos by providing a historical perspective on Americans' changing perceptions about risk. She suggests that the very success of asbestos and other fire-prevention technologies in containing deadly blazes has led to a sort of historical amnesia about the very risks they were supposed to reduce.

Asbestos and Fire is not only the most thoroughly researched and balanced look at the history of asbestos, it is also an important contribution to a larger debate that considers how the risks of technological solutions should be evaluated. As technology offers us ever-increasing opportunities to protect and prevent, Maines urges that learning to accept and effectively address the unintended consequences of technological innovations is a growing part of our collective responsibility.

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