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Fresh Kills: The Making and Unmaking of a Wastescape

Figure 1: Fresh Kills Landfill is on the western edge of Staten Island. Photo by Matthew Trump, via Wikimedia Commons. CC BY-SA 3.0.

At a session on “Urban ‘Wastelands’” held at the European Association for Urban History Conference in Lisbon in September 2014, a presenter stated that the presence of a wasteland can be a *narrative trigger* which is neither rational nor foreseeable, but useful. In this sense, a wasteland develops an identity that clearly sets it apart from other land uses. Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island, New York, is that sort of space. It is the largest human-engineered formation in the world. Located along the Fresh Kills estuary in the northwestern part of Staten Island, it blankets approximately 2,200 acres (890 hectares) on what had once been salt marsh. Over the course of several decades (beginning in 1948 and ending in 2001) it served as the primary disposal facility for New York City’s solid waste. Fresh Kills reopened briefly in late 2001 through June 2002 to provide a receiving point for human remains and building rubble from the destroyed Twin Towers

of September 11. Today it is the focus of a mammoth reclamation project to turn New York's major waste site into expansive parkland.

Fresh Kill's history is marked by transience: from salt marsh, to landfill, to cemetery, and finally to future park. It also is a narrative trigger that beckons us to look back on the site's long pre-landfill history as well as its future. The history of Fresh Kills is most immediately bound to Staten Island and New York City, but also to the larger world of consumption and waste. Some observers regard the massive refuse sink as a curiosity, a dreary eyesore, or even an environmental menace. To New Yorkers in general, if they think about it at all, Fresh Kills was a necessary evil. For the people of Staten Island, it has been a humiliation: resource and receptacle.

Stepping back from its long and truly remarkable history, artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles looked upon Fresh Kills as "a social sculpture," a reflection of our material culture, our consumerism, our acquisitiveness, and our sense of value and worthlessness. This larger view takes Fresh Kills out of the realm of the tangible into a world of ideas and perceptions. Indeed, Fresh Kills, like so many wastescapes, is both *site* and *symbol*. To focus only on the site's history as a landfill misses the larger questions associated with how landscapes become wastescapes, and in this case, cease being wastescapes.

Staten Island before the Landfill

In earlier times Staten Island was called "a little piece of the country in the city." For many years, it functioned as a retreat for the wealthy, as an essentially rural community and then as a suburb. In the early twentieth century, industrial growth on Staten Island became more pronounced, especially along its north side across from New Jersey. Richmond Borough, as it was called after the New York City consolidation in 1898, has always been the outlier in Greater New York. The southernmost borough, Staten Island is third largest in area at 60 square miles (155 square km), but the least populous and the least dense. The western shore is marshy and is bisected by the tidal entrance of Fresh Kills, which drains the borough's northwestern hills and central greenbelt. It is the most geographically separate of the boroughs, economically different, and politically conservative. Before 1713 there was no public ferry, and until the opening of Verrazano-Narrows Bridge (1964) Staten Island was not connected to the other boroughs by land.

While many contemporaries were prone to think of Fresh Kills as uninhabited or wasted space, it had a long history of use. Before European colonists, the Lenape Indians were among the first settlers in the estuary. They hunted, traded, and eventually farmed in the vast marshland. From colonial times onward, white farmers harvested “salt hay” as a source of food for horses. In the largest sense, Staten Islanders came to believe that outsiders treated their home as the “forgotten borough,” so rural and undeveloped that its primary value was to utilize its land only for the greater good of the City of New York.

The most dramatic clash in the nineteenth century over Staten Island’s property was the so-called “Quarantine War.” In 1799, the New York Marine Hospital, known as the Quarantine, opened in the village of Tompkinsville, close to the modern-day disembarkation dock for the Staten Island Ferry. The siting of the New York Marine Hospital grounds in their backyard made no sense to Staten Islanders. Overall, the compound posed a health danger to the community; it threatened real estate values and curbed opportunities for other economic growth. A yellow fever outbreak in 1848 prompted the first major effort to purge the island of the Quarantine. Local citizens burned the Quarantine to the ground and forced the city to move it off Staten Island.

Beginning in 1916 an effort was underway to build a large waste reduction plant on Staten Island to replace a similar facility on Barren Island. The site selected for this facility was Lake’s Island along the Fresh Kills estuary. Thirty-two years later, Fresh Kills Landfill was located in the exact location. Staten Islanders again were up in arms, fighting the siting of the plant all the way to the state capital. The residents even threatened to secede from the city if their demands were not met. The plant nevertheless was constructed in 1916, but closed in 1918 because of pollution violations and economic woes. Neither the Quarantine nor the reduction plant constituted a major wastescape, but they set precedents for the gigantic landfill that was to come.

Fresh Kills Landfill

New York City returned to ocean dumping as a consequence of the closure of the reduction plant in 1918, exposing the failure of the city to develop an effective alternative disposal plan. Ocean dumping generated its own controversy, and after it was curtailed in 1934, the city considered an ambitious incineration plan. Landfilling, however, was

cheaper and more available. The various islands in the New York archipelago had long served a variety of purposes for a city strapped for space. However, an alternative was to create more land along the edges of existing shorelines. Such was a widely practiced enterprise for cities across the country and around the world—creating wanted space out of unwanted land (or water). Filling marshes and swamps to make "usable" land had a singular purpose: to eliminate a noisome or "worthless" site in exchange for solid—and taxable—ground to build upon.

Marsh-rich Staten Island provided a great opportunity to address the city's waste disposal problem created by the curtailment of ocean dumping. In 1938 Great Kills, also on Staten Island, was used as a short-term location for a landfill. A new dispute broke out and the plan was aborted. The sustained isolation, the extensive marshland, and economic downturn of Staten Island opened up new opportunities to exploit the island for the benefit of the city. In 1946 Robert Moses, the "master builder" of New York, was looking for a site to use for highways and parkland (and also for waste disposal). He recommended that refuse be dumped in the marshes in Fresh Kills. Moses assured the locals that his plan was a temporary measure, but opened the way for a permanent solution to the city's disposal crisis. In 1948 the filling began and lasted until 2001.

Landfill Extraordinaire and Closure

Fresh Kills underwent many changes through its long history. In the early 1970s, for example, the site was receiving half of New York City's garbage. By the mid-1980s, Fresh Kills became the city's sole landfill. While some expected it to reach its maximum capacity by the late 1960s, scows continued to cross the harbor incessantly with no alternatives under serious review. The solid-waste infrastructure developed and managed by the New York Department of Sanitation expanded *in situ* alongside the mounds of the landfill itself.

By the 1990s, the convergence of suburban-style population growth on Staten Island with New York City's even greater dependence on the landfill created a new dynamic. Staten Island's physical isolation was over, its population growth gave it a political potency it never had before, and restive citizens tired of bearing the burden of the waste load for all of the boroughs (leading once again to a vociferous threat of secession). The

effort to close Fresh Kills Landfill was simply a political decision, not motivated by a necessity to find another refuse sink. The election of Republican Rudolph Giuliani as mayor of New York City calmed the protests on Staten Island. An appeal to close Fresh Kills was heard loud and clear by the new mayor and by local politicians dependent on Staten Island's conservative votes. Supported by Governor George Pataki (also a Republican), Giuliani, and the borough president, an agreement was reached in May 1996 to close Fresh Kills by 2002. In March 2001, with great fanfare, Fresh Kills was closed.

The decision, however, left the city without an adequate plan for its future disposal needs. This was least important to residents of Staten Island, who believed that they had suffered the humiliation and the environmental risks of the landfill long enough.

9/11: Hallowed Ground

The al-Qaida attack on the Twin Towers on 11 September 2001 turned the issue of the closure of Fresh Kills in an entirely new direction. The landfill was reopened soon thereafter and remained open until June 2002 in order to receive human remains and debris from the site in Lower Manhattan. In making this decision, political leaders might not have realized that a new set of issues arose for Fresh Kills. What had been a garbage dump was now hallowed ground—a cemetery, a resting place. While the remains and rubble from the Twin Towers only occupied a small portion of the landfill site, the space's identity was altered. Added to the tedious process of capping the landfill, mitigating its effluent, and reclaiming land, a different kind of responsibility fell upon the city—how best to honor those lost in the disaster. This was not so much a logistical and technical question but an issue of the heart and a respect for memory. The event also requires introspection about the severe contrast between Fresh Kills as a site where discards of society are hidden and forgotten and a burial place that could not, and should not, be forgotten.

Regeneration: Freshkills Park

The long-term fate of Fresh Kills was not bound by the events of 9/11. In 2003 a plan for a world-class park constructed on the site moved the story of transformation in yet another dramatic direction. Plans would call for the world's largest reclamation project to consist of reclaimed wetlands, recreational facilities, and landscaped public parkland—

and a 9/11 memorial. Between 2001 and 2006 the City of New York conducted a master planning process to turn Fresh Kills into the newly envisioned parkland. The master plan was meant to guide the evolution of the site over a 30-year period. The task of carrying out the plan was given to the Department of Parks and Recreation in 2006.

The decision to build a park brought to a fine point the practical, the abstract, and the aesthetic qualities of Fresh Kills over time. It confronted what going forward with the remaking of the site—yet again—said about that history, and it unearthed the practical problems to be faced by the City of New York by rejecting one role for Fresh Kills and replacing it with another. A change in use bred a change in identity.

Final Thoughts

Transience of space is at the core of the history of this massive wastescape at Fresh Kills, and wastescapes in general. Two big questions come to mind (and there are more):

To what extent is Fresh Kills a story about the dilemma of consumption manifest in a wastescape? The dilemma of consumption is how to be productive, how to manage growth, and how to handle the unwanted. This predicament has dogged New York City throughout its modern history. For Staten Island, mass consumption was a curse, leaving its citizens to wonder why they alone were sacrificed in an era of relentless acquisitiveness. Fresh Kills is a reminder of human habits and societal behaviors caught between material wants and valueless remnants.

Is the regenerated space of Freshkills Park more worthy of preservation as a human or natural artifact? The final stage in the evolution of the wastescape under discussion is touted as "ecological restoration," resurrecting the site from its sordid past. If this were a project of historic preservation there would be a debate over what to preserve, what point in the site's history needed to be the central focus. Instead, momentum has moved toward restoration largely in a pre-landfill context. But is the landfill itself—a massive human artifact—unworthy of historic remembrance? This is related to Mierle Ukeles's concept of places as social structures, not just material geographies. Accommodation has been made for the site as cemetery, since human remains carry a different meaning than material discards. In this instance, a large context for exploring site as symbol should become important.

The landfill, strictly in terms of its materiality, reflects a history of quite a different sort than environmental restoration. The "stuff" in the landfill is inextricably linked to humans and human activity in much the same ways as middens provide insight into the life of ancient civilizations. Is there a way to reconcile the human and the natural in this restored landscape?

With respect to both queries, the landfill is not simply an abstraction, any more than the salt marsh before it or the park after it. Such a mundane thing as a landfill can inspire a broad-ranging narrative trigger, which is truly remarkable and worthy of further discussion. It is equally important to remember that such a wastescape exists within a broad historical stream, and is bound and defined temporally.

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