

Executive Summary



The Vision: Just a few summers from now, Fresh Kills on Staten Island will be transformed into our planet's greatest new self-sustaining landscape environment.

No other site in the world has its distinctive combination of natural resources and latent 'free' energy, each a result of its history and each instilling the place with a powerful dynamic for change.

By enriching and harnessing this unique 2,200 acre reserve, Fresh Kills will emerge in a decade or so as a place so rich and diverse that it will truly become the heart of Staten Island – a 21st century urban park of world renown and an exemplar for the City of New York. Pride in the site's natural resources will be expressed through pioneering technology, making it a model for sustainable regeneration and nature-led redevelopment.

The Project: The recolonization of the land by plants and people is the ethos of the new Fresh Kills and will go hand in hand with social recolonization – for people from Staten Island, New York City, its region and far beyond. A phased program of renewed accessibility will bring a layered sequence of transformation, beginning with a series of three perimeter parks, each leading down with 'green fingers' to the creek shore.

At the heart of Fresh Kills there will be a family of unique built environments, integrating the site's resources – nature + energy + people – to create a dynamic experience. Focussed around the **Hub**, (which will encompass key central amenities), these will consist of the **Migration Center** – focusing on the future wildlife potential of the site's restoration to establish a unique facility aiming to bring the spectacle of animal migration to a broad audience; the **Energy Center**, focusing on the site's energy resources and recycling and the **Earth Center**, a magnificent complex producing a whole spectrum of native plants from seed, together with tons of soil and compost. The ultimate synthesis of these three elements will be the **Eco-spheres** containing world climate zones – tropical, sub-arctic and temperate – which can be experienced at any season of the year. Challenging the boundaries of environmental technologies, this uniquely beautiful assembly of structures will be entirely powered by the energy sources on site.

Natural Systems and Resources: Fifty years of landfill at Fresh Kills offers an opportunity for the rebirth of its environments. Vast reserves of energy, habitat and a distinctive topography will be harnessed in a strategy to transform its natural systems. New communities of plants, birds and animals will come to Fresh Kills. Rich new soil will be created from the rubble and waste of years gone by, and fresh waters will flow again through the site. Fresh Kills will be regenerated, wild in parts, tightly managed in others and fully linked to other natural systems on Staten Island.

Community: The unprecedented breadth of the project demands a radical and creative approach for engaging the community to share in developing its future. Programs of communication will begin immediately and the first projects will benefit those living close by, boosting their economy alongside their environment. Staten Islanders are essential to this project. They will mould the character of Fresh Kills and will benefit in return from its remarkable transformation.

Implementation: The Fresh Kills project will take over a decade to complete in a phased program attracting many millions of visitors for years to come. Essential to its success will be the spirit of public / private partnership. The expertise from the City of New York will integrate with skills and investment from the private sector. A series of stunning visitor attractions will guarantee revenues while quieter parts of the site are developed for wildlife and walking. Land sales may be balanced with increased employment and wealth brought in by private development.

Stewardship: Fresh Kills is a project with a future extending indefinitely as new uses for the landscape develop and each part of the site's rebirth takes hold. A long-term management structure will guarantee its future custody, allowing for change but maintaining a clear vision through the century ahead and beyond. The partnership that transforms the park will plan for its maintenance and ensure the goals of Fresh Kills are in line with Island-wide aspirations.

The Vision



Our Vision for Fresh Kills is expressed in the following key aspirations:

Revealing completely new ways of how people relate to their land, by showing how natural processes and human activities can coexist in a long-term, self-sustaining environment.

Restoring the ecosystem to a state of balance by active human participation in natural processes.

Returning to public use the land that has been inaccessible for the last 50 years, putting it back together to provide an exceptional park for the City and the Region and within this three dedicated parks for Staten Island.

Regenerating Fresh Kills, as a catalyst for changing perceptions. It will show how a public park can respond to the ecological, energy and hydrological cycles and systems of the site. It will demonstrate at all scales the methods and attitudes by which renewable energy resources and land stewardship can be implemented.

Researching new technologies for environmental and architectural design, bringing together landscape and built form in a completely integrated way to deliver an assembly of built structures of the highest international standard in which visitors can not only experience the world's diverse environments but also the dynamic processes that create and sustain them.

Reintegrating the site at all levels – within the Island, across to the city and the region, while generating mixed-use opportunities and responding to community aspirations.

Commentary



Fresh Kills:- A Staten Island Perspective

When Fresh Kills Sanitary Landfill opened in 1948, Robert Moses assured a concerned letter writer that the landfill would close within three years. Moses missed the mark by half a century. To those who had never been closer to the borough than the decks of the Staten Island Ferry, the landfill became the Island's most famous feature. For those who lived on Staten Island, the landfill was an unpleasant reality and a daily reminder of the borough's place in the City's pecking order. The stench was always perceptible to those nearby, generally worse in the summer and often carried inland on the prevailing westerly winds. On top of the engineered hills, flocks of raucous seagulls fought over exposed garbage. Two rows of tall wire fences caught much of the windborne trash, but flimsy plastic bags escaped and festooned the branches of trees and shrubs.

All of this was there to be seen and smelled as Staten Islanders drove the West Shore Expressway (windows up) or went shopping at the Staten Island Mall or to the movies at the Dump. For some history-minded Staten Islanders, the Dump fitted into a pattern of using the Island with its low population and undeveloped land as the site for facilities others didn't want. This pattern began with the Quarantine Hospital (1799-1858) and continued with the tuberculosis sanatorium at Sea View (1905-1961) and the infamous Willowbrook State School (1952-1988).

The lack of vision and long term planning for the Borough was demonstrated with the completion of the Verazzano-Narrows Bridge in 1964. Although some may be nostalgic for a perfect past that never existed, there is no denying that much of Staten Island's peaceful South Shore was transformed into tacky subdivisions and strip malls.

Today, traffic jams and inadequate public transportation have given Staten Islanders the dubious distinction of having the longest median commutes in the United States. Surprisingly, thanks to dedicated citizens and true public servants, much of value remains including communities with tree-lined streets and architectural character, a Greenbelt with miles of trails winding through woodlands and a waterfront of enormous potential. Still, despite its assets, Staten Island has often been viewed disdainfully by the rest of New York City. It has been seen as a boring blue-collar suburb, full of cops and firemen, notable only for its landfill. As one T-shirt put it, Staten Island: World's Largest Dump.

The Fresh Kills Landfill closed in March of 2001. It reopened September 13, 2001 to accept tons of World Trade Center rubble mixed with the remains of thousands of victims, including hundreds of policemen and firemen. Over 20% of the uniformed personnel lost at the WTC lived on Staten Island. Retired firemen and policemen volunteered for the terrible duty of sorting through debris at Fresh Kills in search of something identifiable to give to grieving families. The unsung men and women of the FDNY and NYPD have metamorphosed into heroes. A despised landfill has been transformed into hallowed ground.

It would be hard to overemphasize the opportunity Fresh Kills presents. A borough that has been treated as a working class joke could become a world-class example of how to reclaim the planet's largest landfill and turn it into a self-sustaining landscape environment of great beauty and usefulness. For Staten Islanders, a source of anger and sorrow could become a source of pride and pleasure. It would be a welcome assurance that we can begin to repair what we have despoiled; a note of optimism in a world in need of it.

Tamara Coombs

Staten Island
30.11.01



Fresh Kills:- A London Perspective

'The whole [of Staten] Island is like a garden and affords very fine scenery'. Henry David Thoreau (1843)

Staten Island is part of the sprawling estuarine complex that is New York Harbor; '... a rich aquatic wilderness surrounding the world's greatest city'. The harbor was 'once a pristine estuary bristling with oysters and striped bass, visited by sharks, porpoises, and seals'.

Environmental degradation over centuries, but particularly during the latter half of the twentieth century, diminished the harbor's plant and animal life and despoiled the land around it. But nature is dynamic and is fighting back with the help of public anger fuelled by recognition of what has been lost, as well a growing and sophisticated environmental awareness and political will.

There is hope. Improved sewage treatment has allowed Seagate Beach on Coney Island, South and Midland Beaches on Staten Island and all New York City beaches to be reopened. Sea turtles have been spotted in the Verrazano Narrows and East River, and birds, including raptors like the peregrine falcon, bald eagles, snowy owls and ospreys are returning, as are colonies of common tern and migrating snow geese. New York Harbor is gradually being reborn.

A significant event in the rebirth of the harbor is the final closure of Fresh Kills on the marshy western shores of Staten Island.

As a constituent part of the ecology of the harbor, and the third largest (if the least populated and most suburban) borough of New York City, Staten Island cannot be disassociated from the greater entity. From Manhattan, the Island is, after all, only half an hour away by boat. For visitors (most of whom do not alight on the Island), it is at the end of one of the most magical ferry rides in the world. In the past, Staten Islanders have had a love-hate relationship with New York. But these days, many Islanders – particularly those living on the north shore – have a strong relationship with Manhattan and the big city. Some shorelines and waterfronts, are being rehabilitated, work on ferry terminals is under way, and Staten Island Yankees have a new ballpark.

Staten Island may be part of a larger entity, but at the same time, the special character and history of the Island make it unique.

Up until the turn of the nineteenth century, the very nature of much of the Island's landscape, predominantly gentle and pastoral, with rolling farmland, orchards and forests of oak and chestnut, feathery reed beds, salt hay marsh and watery channels, ensured its vulnerability. Memories of defunct brick factories reside in Clay Pit Ponds, a haunting and remote area of pine barrens. Gentle landscape is so very easy to spoil. This time, the Islanders are determined to have a hand in controlling the shape of the future.

The Island was notoriously malarial; and an investigation carried out in 1871, found that drainage was abysmal and communications difficult. In particular, the ferry service (begun by Cornelius Vanderbilt on the way to the family fortune) was poor. The two events that had the most profound effects on Staten Island were the commencement of landfilling at Fresh Kills, and the construction a quarter century later of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge. If the first grew slowly into a communal blight, the second had immediate effect on the Island's growth and development. Some Staten Islanders divide life into Before the Bridge and After the Bridge.

Believing green spaces to be an absolute necessity for survival in the modern city, Olmsted, distinguished Staten Islander, architect and landscape architect, argued that as towns enlarged and as people developed urban habits, humanity's craving for nature grew. As early as 1870, Olmsted recommended establishment of a park system and over one hundred years later, the Green Belt was wrapped from north to south around the peripheries of Fresh Kills landfill.

But even outside the vast areas of protected open space, the Island offers remarkable sights. In the north part of the Island there is the melancholy beauty of industrial detritus contrasting with rich wildlife habitats. Such sights are surreal, apt to be made the more so by the sudden appearance of a giant oil-tanker on Arthur Kill, looming up above the reeds like a painted apparition.



John McAslan + Partners' vision for Fresh Kills acknowledges the visual and biological richness of the Island and site. Inaccessible for over fifty years, the land will be reclaimed, adding a hugely important piece, missing until now, to the varied mosaic of the landscape. Its ecosystem, fragmented and unbalanced by intense disturbance, can now be healed. Free from disturbance, the natural process of ecological succession with its own unstoppable dynamic has already begun to create a new landscape. Capped and planted landforms offer the chance to establish plant communities from grasslands to scrub, low and upland woodlands.

Changed topography has created a sheltered microclimate while decomposition generates heat. The result is a firm terrain and mild climate for growing. As the landscape develops, diversity and balance will return. Where only a salt marsh ecosystem existed, there can be low-lying creeks and leafy upland forests. Native flora and fauna will be rediscovered and existing wetlands enriched.

McAslan's scheme will show how human activities and natural processes can coexist and be sustained, and how a landscape with qualities of wilderness can be re-established within a stone's throw of the metropolis.

Land, air and water are indispensable to life and biodiversity essential for man's physical and spiritual health. Human beings, it seems, have a basic need to return to these things in their natural state, at least from time to time to refresh both their minds and their bodies. That need is testimony to the fact that, like other animals, we are part of the natural world.

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