

Fresh Kills Makeover; Beauty and One Big Beast of a Dump

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As a student he dreamed of the great lawns of history, from the formal beauty of Versailles to the terraced approach to Castle Howard. He was enchanted by the Villa Borghese and humbled by the severity of the Zen rock formations of Japan.

For a landscape architect, Bill Young had healthy ambitions. But it never occurred to him that he might influence the final shape of one of the world's most challenging and contested urban landmarks, the Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island.

Destiny has summoned the 36-year-old Mr. Young to a task that might have humbled Frederick Law Olmsted: Before it closes in a decade or so, he and his colleagues must somehow convert the largest trash heap on earth -- a dump four times the size of Central Park -- into a playground. 'Could All Be Heaven'

"This could all be heaven," Mr. Young asserts from the safety of his command trailer not far from the "active site," where dozens of mammoth sanitation barges each deposit up to 60 garbage trucks worth of New York City's refuse every day.

Mr. Young's eyes glistened as he described the future of the landfill. Dressed casually in khakis, athletic shoes and a polo shirt, he outlined his vision of a structure that will weigh at least 50 million tons and stand taller than the Chrysler Building when it is completed.

"It could become the greatest greenbelt in the City of New York," he said. "It's on the Atlantic Flyway, you know. Thousands of birds stop to rest and feed here. Hawks, egrets, herons. There are tidal creeks and wetlands. It can be whatever we want it to be."

Fresh Kills is the last great dump in New York City, conceived by Robert Moses in 1948, long before anybody cared much where they threw their garbage. Four others have been shut, and Fresh Kills will close early in the next century, possibly sooner if each New Yorker continues to send an average of a ton of trash there each year. A Final Resting Place

When Fresh Kills is finally full, the pyramid of waste now under construction will rise so high that scientists have expressed fears that it could cave in under its own weight. The city uses specially designed "monster" trucks, with wheels the size of Volkswagen Beetles, to cart the trash to its final resting place. Hydraulic cranes work around the clock shifting garbage from barges to carts.

"No one has ever attempted anything like this before," said the city's Sanitation Commissioner, Steven M. Polan. "So naturally we worry."

To guard against calamity, the city employs geologists to monitor the soil and hydro-geologists to guarantee the structural integrity of the rising mountain -- actually a small range of three mountains. Physicists regularly take bore samplings of subsurface glacial deposits to monitor the poisons in the ground and to make sure the garbage has settled properly and does not fall into the water.

But it is Mr. Young, working with John McLaughlin, a horticulturist on his team until the fiscal crisis turned him into a part-time consultant, who will design the future that New Yorkers can hope to see. They have already laid down more than 52,000 trees and shrubs, many of them in a thin, ornamental demilitarized zone between the boundary of the landfill and one of the city's biggest shopping malls.

"Four years ago you could see the mounds of garbage from all sides," Mr. Young noted, as he drove along the West Shore Expressway that skirts the edge of the landfill. A long strip of green now separates the garbage from the roadway, successfully screening the waste, which recently inched above the 200-foot mark. "It will be another thing when the mountain hits 500 feet," said Mr. Young. "But as a buffer, it's a start."

There is much more to come, he promises, if New York finds the money. Retired landfills can be sealed and used in many ways. When they can no longer accept more waste, engineers seal landfill sites with tough layers of plastic that prevent seeping toxins and are impervious to weather. Flushing Meadow Park and the World's Fair Grounds were built on landfills. So were parts of Pelham Bay. Sections of Fresh Kills have already been closed and capped, and Mr. Young springs into motion the moment they are secured.

First, he throws down a rough cover of soil and native seedlings like little blue stem or switch grass. Then he scatters the flowers that once lived naturally in the area: asters, black-eyed Susans, milkwoods or local wildflowers. Stands of swamp azaleas dot the land as do cherry trees and scrub pines.

Mr. Young, who studied his craft at Syracuse University and now earns \$50,000 a year, hopes to "naturalize" the dump, recreating what he calls a "19th century pine community on the original prairie of Staten Island." While parts of the landfill look like the moon, worse actually, there are already strips of captivating beauty. Rabbits dart through growing clusters of oak and sweet gum trees. Maples take nicely to the acidic soil. Mr. Young has instructed bulldozer operators to contour the dump in a natural way, but it has not been easy, because most of the operators have been trained to make lumpy things flat. Curves and Bumps

"We want the curves and the bumps of the wild," Mr. Young said. He has told the drivers to do whatever is necessary to force themselves to act "crooked." Compliance has been outstanding.

Rather than plant trees and shrubs in orderly rows, Mr. Young favors chaos. "We just throw seeds behind our back and hope for the best," he said, while touring the reclaimed portions of the landfill. "If you put the right seeds in the ground they will recruit grasses and birds and animals. We are watching the birth of a new ecology."

It is not always easy, however, for nature to take its course when it has to overcome a 45-year accretion of slime. Mr. McLaughlin relies heavily on a computer with a simulation program that can predict how every tree, shrub or clump of weeds will grow over the next two decades. As he talks, they rise to three-dimensional scale on a computer screen.

"We are dealing with a big natural world here," he said. "So it's good to have a little sense of what is possible." The Sanitation Department has just agreed to purchase a nearby nursery to help feed its growing appetite for trees and shrubbery.

It takes time and history together to conspire to create a great landscape, and both men seem capable of taking the long view. The very long view. It will be years before it is even clear what public recreational uses Fresh Kills will provide.

But what most others see as a damp and festering swamp, a monument to engineering negligence and civic neglect, these two tend to regard as the future center for Northeast Ospreys, a place for undisturbed nature walks and family picnics.

"You could bring your children to sleigh here in the winter," said Mr. Young, standing in front of a particularly lovely atoll in the midst of the dump. Far in the background, two earth movers sweep slowly to the top of the hill, a small part of the endless caravan of waste.

"You wait," he concluded. "Someday this could become the most peaceful part of the city. For me, it already is."

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