Hart Island - A New Cultural Dimension Through Ecological Recovery

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes how damaged ecological systems could be repaired and nature/culture reconciled through the medium of vegetation design.

Hart Island is situated in Long Island Sound, New York. Since 1868 one million bodies (stillborn babies, the poor, the unidentified and the unclaimed) from New York City have been buried on the island. The current burial practice consists of communal trenches, excavated on a semi-industrial scale. This results in the extensive destruction and degradation of the land surface.

The authors suggest utilising a mosaic of successional vegetation blocks as an ecological repair mechanism. These structure vegetation at multiple scales dependent on the relative spatial position of the block and its temporal relationship in the burial programme.

This process enhances ecological resilience and acts as a catalyst for future interpretations of commemoration to those buried on the island, returning it to the collective and individual consciousness of New York City.

INTRODUCTION

Recently there has been an increase in the popularity of natural burial, which expresses the cycle of life, with its processes of growth, decay, and renewal. (Natural Burial Society 2016) Landscape lies at the heart of this process, where place making practices unfold and generate a dynamic environment...How the landscape reflects this process and 'bridges the gap' of multiple time scales, ecological and cultural constructs is the catalyst for our work on Hart Island.

HART ISLAND - HISTORY

> *'It [Hart Island] is among the most morbid places on earth. The great moments that shape and scar a nation have passed by this hundred acres……. But the strip of land, barely a mile-and-a-third across at its broadest point, knows better than almost any the biggest moment of all: death, and death of the emptiest kind, hollowed out by anonymity.' (Michael Ellison*, *Guardian. June 1999)*

Hart Island is a potter's field, situated in Long Island Sound, New York. In 1868, the Island was purchased by New York City for the purpose of opening an adolescent workhouse. The following year, City Cemetery opened. Mass burials began in 1875.

The burial procedures have remained largely unchanged since 1875. One million adults, infants and babies have been buried in long trenches, three coffins deep and two wide. Burials are supervised by the Department of Corrections, who use low risk prisoners from

Rikers Island as grave-diggers. Approximately 1200 bodies are buried each year. (The Travelling Cloud Museum, The Hart Island Project 2016)

Historically there were no open visiting rights for relatives. However as from 2015 relatives can apply to visit once a month and have access to the burial sites.

BURIAL AND LANDSCAPE

An ecological survey, completed in 1989 identified a number of interrupted and perched ecologies, including closed forest of Salix sp, Prunus serotina and Ulmus Americana; open woodland of Populus deltoides, Platanus x hispanica, Acer platanoides, Ailanthus altissima, Prunus serotina, Salix nigra; herbaceous meadows in the process of succession to open woodland containing Verbascum, Aster, Cirsium, Phragmites sp, Artemisia douglasiana and salt marsh. Topographically the island is dominated by low lying and undulating topography but also contains low bluffs, riprap, salt marsh and beach interstitial zones.

The siting of graves does not take account of the ecological health of the island or the commemoration process. Existing burial plots are tracked over by heavy equipment to access new sites, causing subsidence and pooling of water. Older burial plots have collapsed under the weight of heavy equipment. Disinterment after 25 years and reuse of burial plots inhibits ecological rehabilitation. (The Hart Island Project 2016)

Shorelines are susceptible to erosion and rising sea levels and older burial sites lie close to the shoreline with no containment mechanisms to prevent pollution.

BURIAL AND RELATIVES

Currently mass graves are left open, sometimes for long periods of time and since relatives have now been accorded visiting rights once a month, there are humanitarian and health and safety issues. Those relatives commemorating recently buried adults and babies would almost certainly be standing at or pass by open graves.

THE PROPOSITION

The lack of opportunity both physically and emotionally to commemorate the dead removes this landscape from society's acknowledgement, which is difficult to overcome whilst the jurisdiction remains with the Department of Correction. A recent bill to transfer jurisdiction to the Parks Department was rejected by that agency as they feel that 'The operation of a public cemetery falls well outside of the agency's expertise and available resources.' (New York Times, January 20, 2016.)

The challenge is therefore to propose solutions, which 'bridge the gap' at a range of scales between existing constrained cultural and debilitated ecological systems. These solutions need to be low cost, work within the existing system with minimum operational modifications and satisfy the enhanced requirements for commemoration in conjunction with the establishment of a diverse ecology.

TACTICS

The surface of the island is initially given potential through the designation of 'Locations' for burial and non burial. Each location for burial contains a number of 'Sites' and each site can contain a number of 'Blocks'. This is based on information from the Ecological survey, data from the Travelling Cloud Museum database and the DOC plan for future burial sites.

'Locations' are specified as containing no burials and pre 1991 graves (2016). Those locations where burials were post 1991 will become available for burial after 25 years from the date of burial, based on the legislation that allows disinterment after this time.

'Sites' within a location are nominally 65 x 58 meters, equivalent to the parameters of one year's burial by the DOC. The geometry and the size of the site will ultimately be dependent on site condition and existing infrastructure. This site notation has been taken as the key parameter for the introduction of vegetation matrices as it respects existing DOC practice and is of a scale that supports ecological and cultural identity.

The number of 'Blocks' is very much dependent on site size and orientation. The designation of blocks within a site allows for the introduction of woody vegetation at an earlier stage of the medium designation and potentially addresses the issues of burials remaining partially uncovered for extended periods of time.

Sites are designated as:

'immediate': burial between 0 – 1 years,

'medium': burial between 1 – 5 years

'long-term': burial 5 – 25 + years.

This process constructs hybrid agencies of succession and plant sociology, which are both culturally and ecologically connected, creating a mosaic of evolving habitats in space and time.

Example: The immediate site would be planted with an annual flower meadow as it signifies that this section will come in to use, within the next year. This annual meadow not only relates to the present time as a singular event, but also can be introduced as a multiple element any time in the sequence as a cover or after more 'long-term' vegetation structures of 5+ years have been removed.

The medium sites are sown with a mix of herbaceous meadow plants. An essential element in the matrix of seed is the requirement that the mix is adaptable and dynamic, dependent on existing ground conditions, autecology principles of species interaction (Marc-Rajan Köppler, James D. Hitchmough 2015) and the need to create an extended flowering period and a resilient seasonal structure. This typology has a lifespan of 5 years, but can also be introduced at any time within the sequence.

Long-term sites are planted with woody vegetation to develop complexity. In sites, which have up to 20 years undisturbed integrity, a system of rotation coppice and herbaceous ground layer will be implemented. Cycles of rotation become an important cultural measure of the overall burial process as well as providing material for future use in the cultural

infrastructure. Post 20 year sites provide the opportunity for the establishment of a woodland type character to maximise habitat diversification through closed and open canopy typologies.

A policy of LTL (Learn to Love) (Davis M 2009) will be adopted for existing vegetation structures, which are designated as unsuitable for burial. The aim of this approach will be to carefully manage and add to the complex system that reflects the evolution of the hybrid ecologies, which have colonised the island.

CONCLUSIONS

What results from this approach is a mosaic which evolves spatially and temporally according to the predictive land use set up by the landscape and burial strategy. Through the introduction of these different typologies in conjunction with an enhancement of existing systems (e.g. salt marsh), the island will develop multiple levels of ecological resilience to operational conditions and global changes.

This approach when framed as a cultural phenomena creates opportunities for a potential change in perception. No longer is the islands surface representative of a single monolithic process, but instead introduces notions of beauty and sensory diversity. The relaxation of the visiting rights of relatives, combined with the implementation of the landscape and burial strategy, produces the platform for incremental change. The reprogrammed surface will encourage interaction, with the potential for temporary pathways, places to sit and reflect to create a more civilised process of commemoration. Potentially this could provide opportunities for the prisoners to learn new skills in horticulture and ecology as part of their rehabilitation-another aspect of 'bridging the gap'!

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