



# TO LOVE A LANDFILL.

DIRT AND THE ENVIRONMENT

[Chapter 6 from *\_Dirt: The Filthy Reality of Everyday Life.\_* 2011. Nadine Monem, ed. London: Profile Books Ltd.]



The landfill can be understood as a social space where discarded material is collected and contained, but also where cultural meaning may accrue and human relationships may be forged or understood.

The idea of the landfill as a common, socially meaningful, space is by no means a recent proposition. In 1850, the minor English poet and critic Richard Hengist Horne wrote a vivid and sensitive study of the community surrounding the Great Dust Heap at Gray's Inn Road in London in his 'Dust, or Ugliness Redeemed', reproduced here in an abridged form. Those same themes of community, value and meaning in the landfill are taken up more than 150 years later by the US anthropologist Robin Nagle in her discussion of the relationship between the city dump and the community it sustains. Taken together, these two texts reflect our ambivalent relationship with the idea of the landfill, as both a shared repository for waste and a place of shared social significance.

# DUST; OR UGLINESS REDEEMED

R. H. HORNE



On a murky morning in November, wind north-east, a poor old woman with a wooden leg was seen struggling against the fitful gusts of the bitter breeze, along a stony zigzag road, full of deep and irregular cart-ruts. Her ragged petticoat was blue, and so was her wretched nose. A stick was in her left hand, which assisted her to dig and hobble her way along; and in her other hand, supported also beneath her withered arm, was a large rusty iron sieve. Dust and fine ashes filled up all the wrinkles in her face; and of these there were a prodigious number, for she was eighty-three years old. Her name was Peg Dotting.

About a quarter of a mile distant, having a long ditch and a broken-down fence as a foreground, there rose against the muddled-gray sky, a huge Dust-heap of a dirty black colour – being, in fact, one of those immense mounds of cinders, ashes, and other emptyings from dust-holes and bins, which have conferred celebrity on certain suburban neighbourhoods of a great city. Toward this dusky mountain old Peg Dotting was now making her way.

Advancing toward the Dust-heap by an opposite path, very narrow, and just reclaimed from the mud by a thick layer of freshly broken flints, there came at the same time Gaffer Doubleyear, with his bone-bag slung over his shoulder. The rags of his coat fluttered in the east wind, which also whistled keenly round his almost rimless hat, and troubled his one eye. The other eye, having met with an accident

last week, he had covered neatly with an oyster-shell, which was kept in its place by a string at each side, fastened through a hole. He used no staff to help him along, though his body was nearly bent double, so that his face was constantly turned to the earth, like that of a four-footed creature. He was ninety-seven years of age.

As these two patriarchal labourers approached the great Dust-heap, a discordant voice hallooed to them from the top of a broken wall. It was meant as a greeting of the morning, and proceeded from little Jem Clinker, a poor deformed lad, whose back had been broken when a child. His nose and chin were much too large for the rest of his face, and he had lost nearly all his teeth from premature decay. But he had an eye gleaming with intelligence and life, and an expression at once patient and hopeful. He had balanced his misshapen frame on the top of the old wall, over which one shrivelled leg dangled, as if by the weight of a hob-nailed boot that covered a foot large enough for a ploughman. In addition to his first morning's salutation of his two aged friends, he now shouted out in a tone of triumph and self-gratulation, in which he felt assured of their sympathy –

‘Two white skins, and a tor’shell-un!’

It may be requisite to state that little Jem Clinker belonged to the dead-cat department of the Dust-heap, and now announced that a prize of three skins, in superior condition, had rewarded him for being first in the field.

He was enjoying a seat on the wall, in order to recover himself from the excitement of his good fortune.

At the base of the great Dust-heap the two old people now met their young friend – a sort of great-grandson by mutual adoption – and they at once joined the party who had by this time assembled as usual, and were already busy at their several occupations.

A Dust-heap of this kind is often worth thousands of pounds. The present one was very large and very valuable. It was in fact a large hill, and being in the vicinity of small suburb cottages, it rose above them like a great black mountain. Thistles, groundsel, and rank grass grew in knots on small parts which had remained for a long time undisturbed; crows often alighted on its top, and seemed to put on their spectacles and become very busy and serious; flocks of sparrows often made predatory descents upon it; an old goose and gander might sometimes be seen following each other up its side, nearly midway; pigs rooted around its base – and now and then, one bolder than the rest would venture some way up, attracted by the mixed odours of some hidden marrow-bone enveloped in a decayed cabbage-leaf – a rare event, both of these articles being unusual oversights of the Searchers below.

The principal ingredient of all these Dust-heaps is fine cinders and ashes; but as they are accumulated from the contents of all the dust-holes and bins of the vicinity, and as many more as possible, the fresh arrivals in their original state present very heterogeneous materials. We cannot better describe them than by presenting a brief sketch of the different departments of the Searchers and Sorters, who are

The Great Dust-Heap at King's Cross, London, next to Battle Bridge and the Smallpox Hospital, in 1837.  
E. H. Dixon / The Great Dust-Heap / 1837 /  
watercolour painting / 18.8 × 27.4 cm

assembled below to busy themselves upon the mass of original matters which are shot out from the carts of the dustmen.

The bits of coal, the pretty numerous results of accident and servants' carelessness, are picked out, to be sold forthwith; the largest and best of the cinders are also selected, by another party, who sell them to laundresses, or to braziers (for whose purposes coke would do as well); and the next sort of cinders, called the breeze, because it is left after the wind has blown the finer cinders through an upright sieve, is sold to the brick-makers.

Two other departments, called the 'soft-ware' and the 'hard-ware', are very important. The former includes all vegetable and animal matters – everything that will decompose. These are selected and bagged at once, and carried off as soon as possible, to be sold as manure for ploughed land, wheat, barley, &c. Under this head, also, the dead cats are comprised. They are generally the perquisites of the women Searchers. Dealers come to the wharf, or dust-field, every evening; they give sixpence for a white cat, fourpence for a coloured cat, and for a black one according to her quality. The 'hard-ware' includes all broken pottery, pans, crockery, earthenware, oyster-shells, &c., which are sold to make new roads.

'The bones' are selected with care, and sold to the soap-boiler. He boils out the fat and marrow first, for special use, and the bones are then crushed and sold for manure.

Of 'rags', the woollen rags are bagged and sent off for hop-manure; the white linen rags are washed, and sold to make paper, &c.

The 'tin things' are collected and put into an oven with a grating at the bottom, so that the solder which unites the parts melts, and runs through into a receiver. This is sold separately; the detached pieces of tin are then sold to be melted up with old iron, &c.

Bits of old brass, lead, &c., are sold to be molted up separately, or in the mixture of ores.

All broken glass vessels, [such] as cruets, mustard-pots, tumblers, wine-glasses, bottles, &c., are sold to the old-glass shops.

As for any articles of jewellery – silver spoons, forks, thimbles, or other plate and valuables, they are pocketed off-hand by the first finder. Coins of gold and silver are often found, and many 'coppers'.

Meantime, everybody is hard at work near the base of the great Dust-heap. A certain number of cart-loads having been raked and searched for all the different things just described, the whole of it now undergoes the process of sifting. The men throw up the stuff, and the women sift it.

'When I was a young girl,' said Peg Dotting –

'That's a long while ago, Peggy,' interrupted one of the sifters: but Peg did not hear her.

'When I was quite a young thing,' continued she, addressing old John Doubleyear, who threw up the dust into her sieve, 'it was the fashion to wear pink roses in the shoes, as bright as that morsel of ribbon Sally has just picked out of the dust; yes, and sometimes in the hair, too, on one side of the head, to set off the white powder and salve-stuff. I never wore one of these head-dresses myself – don't throw up the dust so high, John – but I lived only a few doors lower down from those as did. Don't throw up the dust so high, I tell 'ee – the wind takes it into my face.'

'Ah! There! What's that?' suddenly exclaimed little Jem, running as fast as his poor withered legs would allow him toward a fresh heap, which had just been shot down on the wharf from a dustman's cart. He made a dive and a search – then another – then one deeper still. 'I'm sure I saw it!' cried he, and again made a dash

with both hands into a fresh place, and began to distribute the ashes and dust and rubbish on every side, to the great merriment of all the rest.

'What did you see, Jemmy?' asked old Doubleyear, in a compassionate tone.

'Oh, I don't know,' said the boy, 'only it was like a bit of something made of real gold!'

A fresh burst of laughter from the company assembled followed this somewhat vague declaration, to which the dustmen added one or two elegant epithets, expressive of their contempt of the notion that they could have overlooked a bit of anything valuable in the process of emptying sundry dust-holes, and carting them away.

'Ah,' said one of the sifters, 'poor Jem's always a-fancying something or other good but it never comes.'

'Didn't I find three cats this morning?' cried Jem, 'Two on 'em white 'uns! How you go on!'

'I meant something quite different from the like o' that,' said the other; 'I was a-thinking of the rare sights all you three there have had, one time and another.'

Before the day's work was ended, however, little Jem again had a glimpse of the prize which had escaped him on the previous occasion. He instantly darted, hands and head foremost, into the mass of cinders and rubbish, and brought up a black mass of half-burnt parchment, entwined with vegetable refuse, from which he speedily disengaged an oval frame of gold, containing a miniature, still protected by its glass, but half covered with mildew from the damp. He was in ecstasies at the prize. Even the white cat-skins paled before it. In all probability some of the men would have taken it from him, 'to try and find the owner', but for the presence and interference of his friends Peg Dotting and old Doubleyear, whose great age, even among the present company, gave them a certain position of respect and consideration. So all the rest now went their way, leaving the three to examine and speculate on the prize.

These Dust-heaps are a wonderful compound of things. A banker's cheque for a considerable sum was found in one of them. It was on Herries & Farquhar, in 1847. But banker's cheques, or gold and silver articles, are the least valuable of their ingredients. Among other things, a variety of useful chemicals are extracted. Their chief value, however, is for the making of bricks. The fine cinder-dust and ashes are used in the clay of the bricks, both for the red and grey stacks. Ashes are also used as fuel between the layers of the clump of bricks, which could not be burned in that position without them. The ashes burn away, and keep the bricks open. Enormous quantities are used. In the brickfields at Uxbridge, near the Drayton Station, one of the brick-makers alone will frequently contract for fifteen or sixteen thousand chaldrons of this cinder-dust, in one order. Fine coke, or coke-dust, affects the market at times as a rival; but fine coal, or coal-dust, never, because it would spoil the bricks.

As one of the heroes of our tale had been originally – before his promotion – a chimney-sweeper, it may be only appropriate to offer a passing word on the genial subject of soot. Without speculating on its origin and parentage, whether derived from the cooking of a Christmas dinner, or the production of the beautiful colours and odours of exotic plants in a conservatory, it can briefly be shown to possess many qualities both useful and ornamental.

When soot is first collected, it is called 'rough soot', which, being sifted, is then called 'fine soot', and is sold to farmers for manuring and preserving wheat and turnips. This is more especially used in Herefordshire, Bedfordshire, Essex, &c. It is rather a costly article, being fivepence per bushel. One contractor sells annually as much as three

thousand bushels; and he gives it as his opinion, that there must be at least one hundred and fifty times this quantity (four hundred and fifty thousand bushels per annum) sold in London. Farmer Smutwise, of Bradford, distinctly asserts that the price of the soot he uses on his land is returned to him in the straw, with improvement also to the grain. And we believe him. Lime is used to dilute soot when employed as a manure. Using it pure will keep off snails, slugs, and caterpillars from peas and various other vegetables, as also from dahlias just shooting up, and other flowers; but we regret to add that we have sometimes known it kill or burn up the things it was intended to preserve from unlawful eating. In short, it is by no means so safe to use for any purpose of garden manure, as fine cinders and wood-ashes, which are good for almost any kind of produce, whether turnips or roses. Indeed, we should like to have one fourth or fifth part of our garden-beds composed of excellent stuff of this kind. From all that has been said, it will have become very intelligible why these Dust-heaps are so valuable. Their worth, however, varies not only with their magnitude (the quality of all of them is much the same), but with the demand. About the year 1820, the Marylebone Dust-heap produced between four thousand and five thousand pounds. In 1832, St George's paid Mr Stapleton five hundred pounds a year, not to leave the Heap standing, but to carry it away. Of course he was only too glad to be paid highly for selling his Dust.

But to return. The three friends having settled to their satisfaction the amount of money they should probably obtain by the sale of the golden miniature-frame, and finished the castles which they had built with it in the air, the frame was again infolded in the sound part of the parchment, the rags and rottenness of the law were cast away, and up they rose to bend their steps homeward to the little hovel where Peggy lived, she having invited the others to tea, that they might talk yet more fully over the wonderful good luck that had befallen them.

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PICTURE TO COME

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# THE HISTORY AND FUTURE OF FRESH KILLS

ROBIN NAGLE

## Landfills as commons

Most people do not choose to spend time at active landfills. Livestock are not put out to pasture there, crops are not raised, game is not hunted, picnickers do not ward off ants, runners do not sweat, children do not gambol. A landfill is generally seen as an unfortunate answer to solid-waste disposal problems. It is not understood as a commons – that is, a land or similar resource shared by and for the benefit of a community – though its function as the repository of unwanted material goods is essential to the well-being of the metropolis that relies on it.<sup>1</sup> Often considered a blight, it is also a space to which all residents contribute, a ‘social sculpture’.<sup>2</sup> The artificial geography of a landfill is created by all, shared by all, and has the potential to be transformed after closing into something that all may use and enjoy.

Moreover, a landfill reveals unexpected details about the society that creates it. ‘The urban physiology of excretion,’ notes social historian Alain Corbin, ‘constitutes one of the privileged means of access to social mentalities.’<sup>3</sup> He was referring to sewage disposal, but the sentiment applies just as well to solid waste. That landfills are the disposal method of choice for much of the USA reflects a particular set of relationships between citizens, municipalities, environmentalists, material culture, moral and aesthetic sensibilities, and the science of solid waste management.<sup>4</sup>

Landfills let us get rid of our debris but also keep it indefinitely. Contrary to popular belief, much of our buried trash does not decompose.<sup>5</sup> When choosing between a landfill and an incinerator (or a ‘waste-to-energy facility’, as they’re now called), a landfill is allegedly safer because incineration is thought to cause unacceptable air pollution. The off-gassings of methane and other volatile organic compounds at many landfills, however, are often greater threats to air quality. Since landfills are usually sited far from crowded population centres, they allow the illusion that there is a distant, disconnected place to ‘throw away’ rejectamenta. In the United States, with its vast open spaces, it seems impossible to run out of places in which to deposit refuse. In part because of this, source reduction – generating less trash in the first place – is not seriously explored.

Fresh Kills landfill in New York City is an excellent example of these trends and assumptions. Historically significant and politically volatile, the site has always been a commons, whether or not it was ever formally recognised as such. Here I will consider how a dump or landfill can serve as a commons, and explore the unique role Fresh Kills plays in New York’s well-being.

First, to contextualise the challenge, it is helpful to illustrate how solid waste has vexed us for centuries. After that I explore the parameters of commons, briefly review Fresh Kills' history, and finally investigate some of the social implications and cognitive difficulties of allowing a landfill the role of a commons. I argue that if we cannot appreciate a landfill as a common resource, our understanding of our larger culture is incomplete.

### Garbage through time

Garbage, in the form of rejected and discarded material remains, has been part of human civilisation since our first days as hominids and perhaps even before.<sup>6</sup> The transformation of garbage into a large-scale problem, however, had to wait for us to move from hunting/gathering groups and agrarian communities into early urban sites. Although not uniquely urban, garbage presents particular challenges to city dwellers.

Rubbish in ancient Troy, for example, was simply dropped on the floors of homes or tossed in the streets. In approximately 2500 BC the city of Mahenjo-Daro in the Indus river valley had rubbish chutes, trash bins, a drainage system and a scavenging service. The Babylonians had cesspools, drains and a sewage system. The Israelites took a big step toward improving hygiene when Mosaic law directed Jews to remove their waste and bury it far from living quarters.<sup>7</sup>

The first municipal dumps known in the Western world were organised by the Athenians, who also enacted what may have been the world's first anti-litter ordinance. The Romans had more trouble coping with sanitation, and by the time the population of Rome reached its zenith of a million and a half inhabitants, there were unprecedented health and pollution problems. But at least the Romans had their baths and a version of a sewer. Europe forgot these niceties for nearly a millennium after Rome fell.

Indeed, the filth of Europe in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance is difficult to imagine. King Philip II of France ordered the streets of Paris to be paved in 1184 because he was sickened by the smells emanating from the garbage-soaked mud. It didn't help much. 'This town is always dirty,' wrote one visitor to the City of Light in the late 1500s, 'and 'tis such a dirt, that by perpetual motion is beaten into such black unctuous oil that where it sticks no art can wash it off . . . It also gives so strong a scent that it may be smelt many miles off if the wind be in one's face.'<sup>8</sup>

London was as rank as Paris. In 1347, 'two men were prosecuted for piping ordure into a neighbour's cellar – it says a great deal about the general smell of London at the time that this economical device was not discovered until the cellar began to overflow'.<sup>9</sup> The flow of the Thames was regularly impeded by trash and untreated sewage.<sup>10</sup> Sanitary conditions in Europe remained relatively awful until the Industrial Revolution, which 'produced the most degraded urban environment the world had yet seen . . .'<sup>11</sup>

In New York, street-side trash collecting was legislated in the 1650s, but it happened only sporadically, and much waste was simply dumped along the city's shore. This proved a popular solution to the problem of too much trash and too little space. Even in the 1600s, real estate was a hot commodity in New York, and much of urban life centred on the downtown waterfront. Merchants were eager to build on crowded spaces, and dumping helped create more land onto which they could expand. In Manhattan, below City Hall, 33 per cent of the land is built on 'street sweepings, ashes, garbage, ballast from ships, dirt and rubble from excavated building sites, and other forms of solid waste dumped

along the shore'.<sup>12</sup> Some parts of lower Manhattan have been filled three blocks out from the original shoreline.<sup>13</sup>

By the turn of the twentieth century, new fill opportunities were greeted enthusiastically. 'The possibilities of this reclamation are almost boundless,' boasted John McG. Woodbury, the commissioner of the city's Department of Street Cleaning (precursor to the Department of Sanitation). 'The lowlands on Jamaica Bay,' he noted, referring to a broad network of marshes and islands on the city's south-eastern edge, 'afford an almost unlimited supply of dumping ground.'<sup>14</sup>

The trash of New York, and of many other American cities, has created thousands of acres of shared space that would not otherwise exist. The contours of New York differ irrevocably from their configurations before Europeans arrived, both inland and along the shore. About 20 per cent of contemporary Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx is landfill. Archaeological evidence suggests that even before the arrival of the Europeans, the indigenous residents dumped refuse along the water's edges; discerning an 'original' shoreline for the city would be virtually impossible.

There is little public memory of the source of so much land. Few people realise that both of New York's airports are built on fill, as are the foundations of the Triborough, George Washington, Verrazano, Whitestone and Throgs Neck bridges. Numerous New York parks (Great Kills in Staten Island, Orchard Beach in the Bronx, Battery Park in Manhattan) were wetlands or water before they were filled.

Fresh Kills will someday be one of those spaces. A Department of Sanitation Annual Report from the 1950s bragged that Fresh Kills was the greatest land reclamation project ever attempted. This unlikely claim is being made real with current work to transform the formerly pungent geography into one of the largest green spaces within the borders of New York City.



Until the late 1980s, Athey wagons such as these were used to haul rubbish from barges to the landfill's active bank, or tipping point, at Fresh Kills. [Photographer] / Athey wagons at Fresh Kills Landfill / [date?] / photograph / [dimensions?]

## Invented commons

Its status as a future park is not the only reason Fresh Kills qualifies as a commons. Social arrangements that bring a commons into existence, or that recognise and protect certain resources as commons, are in continual flux. The idea of a commons challenges notions of private property, prosperity, and who has rights to define and control communal well-being. Historically, the term 'commons' was most often applied to shared open areas of land used for agricultural purposes. The word is still in everyday use in England, where the commons were sources of grazing pasture, game, fish, and fuel wood for hundreds of years, until enclosure laws enacted during the eighteenth century forbade access (a process that was repeated throughout much of Europe). Resulting hardships among the peasantry included starvation and inspired violent reactions, which in turn provoked Draconian responses from the state. The punishment in Britain for removing the boundary markers of newly enclosed commons was death.<sup>15</sup>

A cheerier model of a commons is the grazing pasture sometimes pictured at the heart of colonial New England towns. Careful husbandry meant that it was available in perpetuity, or at least until advancing modernities made livestock a cumbersome possession for townsfolk. Public parks often replaced those older commons; now humans occupy space once dedicated to large ruminants.<sup>16</sup>

Grazing cows would be a rare sight in such places today, though the Sheep's Meadow in New York's Central Park hosted its namesake until 1934, when parks officials, fearing that the woolly mammals would end up on dinner plates made empty by the Great Depression, removed them.

More contemporary examples abound. In the USA, the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts of the 1970s were explicit recognition that those basic elements constitute shared resources that must be safeguarded, transforming them from unmanaged (and thus exploitable) to managed (and thus at least potentially protected) commons.<sup>17</sup> The Georges Bank, a once-plentiful fishing ground off the north-east coast of the United States, was for centuries an unmanaged commons; today it suffers serious depletion after unbridled overuse. Biodiversity in some of the planet's last tropical rainforests inspires nations like Brazil to guard them from northern powers that would investigate. Such efforts impose a shelter on these wild commons but also place them at risk, since science that would strengthen the cause of preservation is rebuked with the same energy as attempts at exploitation.

Next to these illustrations, a landfill seems a lowly and unlikely commons.<sup>18</sup> But it serves, in the sense of a resource set aside by the community for its shared use, to enhance the greater good. Without a functioning landfill or some other way of ridding itself of debris, no metropolis can survive.

A landfill commons is humble in part because of the stuff that makes it. Garbage imposes technical, environmental, social and cognitive challenges that unite and commemorate the culture that creates it. Household rubbish in particular underscores the problem of trash as intimate, perpetual, and despised. It is intimate because there are few activities that occupy us in any given 24-hour period, except perhaps sleep, that do not generate garbage. Thus our refuse reflects our simplest, most mundane behaviours as well as our more celebrated moments. It is perpetual because, if we partake of contemporary life at what I call average necessary quotidian velocities, there are few ways to stop its creation.<sup>19</sup> And trash is despised for many reasons, the simplest of which is its conglomerate



Seagulls surround a tractor at work on an active fill site at Fresh Kills landfill.  
*Diane Cook and Len Jenschel / Fresh Kills  
Landfill on Staten Island, New York City / 1992 /  
photograph / [dimensions?]*



power to disgust. A single mouldy orange peel is not so gross, especially if it's my own mouldy orange peel, but a bucket of rotting fruit from who knows what source can elicit strong negative reaction.<sup>20</sup>

Trash invites a willing ignorance that is nicely revealed in our vehemently vague language of discard. We don't 'put' it away, which would imply that we save it for later use.<sup>21</sup> Rather, we 'throw' it away, and the 'away' is comfortably undefined – but it is often a landfill. As the last stop for our discards, landfills force commonality on our material traces, whether or not such commonality existed before. They hold startlingly accurate records of the people who form them, and unlike the people, they endure. 'If I were a sociologist anxious to study in detail the life of any community,' wrote Wallace Stegner, 'I would go very early to its refuse piles . . . For whole civilisations we have sometimes no more of the poetry and little more of the history than this.'<sup>22</sup> The artifacts that will fully represent our lives are safely stored within mega-time-capsules, which we call landfills,' concurs archaeologist William Rathje. 'It is these anonymous, random remains that will tell our story to the future . . .'<sup>23</sup>

Landfills unite objects. They also sometimes unite citizens. In municipalities without garbage collection, they bring together residents who must travel to their landfill (or, in days gone by, to their dump) to discard trash. They often provide formal or informal recycling centres, where rejected but still useful possessions are claimed by new owners. Some landfills, or dumps, provide entertainment. When I was a child growing up in a small town in northern New York State, we went to ours on summer evenings to sit in the car with the windows rolled up and the headlights focused on the pits of trash, watching bears forage for food. We usually met neighbours who



Left:  
The job of the bank supervisor at Fresh Kills landfill was to monitor operations at the active bank, or tipping point, of the landfill. The active bank changed from day to day, so the office would be moved on tractors to the active site. [Photographer?] / Bank Supervisor's Office, Fresh Kills / [date?] / photograph / [dimensions?]

Opposite:  
A Payhauler (left) and a compactor (right) at work on Fresh Kills landfill in 1991. [Photographer?] / Landfilling at Fresh Kills / 1991 / photograph / [dimensions?]

had come for the same attraction. But even more significant connections can occur. Nuptials were celebrated at the Bethel, Maine transfer station – formerly known as the town dump – on 1 September 2003. The location made sense to the newly-weds because it was where Rockie Graham, a conscientious recycler, met her husband, Dave Hart, a new employee at the facility. Townsfolk contributed to their honeymoon fund with bottles and cans to be redeemed for nickels.<sup>24</sup>

### Fresh Kills: landfill

Fresh Kills is a rich example of a landfill as commons, which its history – especially its recent and future history – suggests. In part because of its audacious scale, it is a commons not only for the city that created it but also for the larger civilisation that the city represents.

Before it was a landfill, Fresh Kills was a series of inlet marshes, woods and meadows nestled into the middle western edge of Staten Island, separated from New Jersey by a narrow strip of water called the Arthur Kill. ('Kill' derives from the Dutch word for 'creek' and place names that include it, like the Catskill Mountains, are traces of a long-gone colonial legacy.) Indigenous artefacts estimated to be nearly 10,000 years old were discovered there. To the north, Linoleumville (now a neighbourhood called Travis) was founded around the country's first linoleum factory, built in 1882 by British inventor Frederick Walton. In its heyday, the factory

employed more than 200 workers. By the early twentieth century, nearby hamlets included Kreischerville to the south (now Charleston), where locally mined clay was made into bricks and drainpipes.

Fresh Kills provided treasures for locals. Old women roamed the marshes harvesting herbs, wild flowers, grapes for jelly, and watercress. Italians came for mushrooms and mud shrimp. In the fall, truck farmers harvested salt hay with scythes, while Jewish elders and rabbis cut carefully chosen willow twigs for Succoth.<sup>25</sup>

Early in the 1900s, through a breathtaking piece of political legerdemain, the city established a reduction plant at Fresh Kills. Dead horses, other offal and rubbish were to be boiled down into grease, fertiliser and glycerine. The contractor who built the plant promised that odours would not be a problem, but it was regularly filled past capacity. Garbage and carcasses rotted in uncovered barges for months at a time. The odours – the very ones that city officials had promised wouldn't exist – were nauseating. Public outcry was immediate and loud, but the plant was not closed until the mayor who approved it lost his bid for re-election.<sup>26</sup>

Two decades later, in 1938, city planner and infamous autocrat Robert Moses wanted to build a bridge that would further his grand scheme to lace the New York region with highways. Fresh Kills' many bogs and swamps seemed the ideal place to fill for the bridge's foundations. As city parks commissioner and chairman of the Triborough Bridge Authority (among other titles), Moses already commanded the dumping of city trash to create the foundations for highways, bridges, and parks all over the city; Fresh Kills was merely one more place to fill in, to make 'taxable'.<sup>27</sup>

It took a while, and the Staten Islanders did their best to thwart the plan,<sup>28</sup> but dumping started on Fresh Kills in 1948; soon complaints were sounding from every neighbourhood. Moses assured irate residents that he only needed three years to fill the land. In 1951, however, he urged the mayor to allow more time. 'The Fresh Kills project cannot fail to affect constructively a wide area around it,' he reported that year. 'It is at once practical and idealistic.'<sup>29</sup>

By 1954, Fresh Kills covered 669 acres. Five years later, the city proposed extending its life by fifteen years. In 1965, when pressed about a closing date, officials demurred, claiming none could be set. By 1966, the landfill consumed 1,584 acres. A planning report in 1968 proposed a ski resort once the landfill's slopes were finally capped, but this surprisingly creative notion did not count on the perpetual presence of methane gas, a heat-generating by-product of decomposing organic matter.

By the early 1970s, other landfills in the city were closing, and Fresh Kills received almost half the city's refuse. In 1980, the state's Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) charged the city with environmental violations because Fresh Kills had been built and expanded without linings, gas-retrieval systems, or leachate-recovery plans, among other problems. By then the landfill was so far from compliance with existing regulations, most legislated after it was opened, that it was technically illegal. The same charges against the city were made again in 1985, when Fresh Kills was receiving almost 22,000 tons of garbage every day – nearly all of New York's trash. Tipping rose to an all-time high of 29,000 tons a day by 1987.<sup>30</sup> By then the landfill employed 650 full-time workers, representing eighteen different unions.

In 1990, for the third time, the state's DEC cited the city for violations



Right:  
Workers move garbage at Fresh  
Kills landfill in 1990.  
Stephen Ferry / Tractor at Fresh  
Kills Landfill / 1990 / photograph /  
[dimensions?]



Left:  
An active bank, or tipping point,  
at Fresh Kills landfill in the late  
1980s.  
*[Photographer?] / Active Bank at  
Fresh Kills Landfill / late 1980s /  
photograph / [dimensions?]*

Opposite:  
A view of Lower Manhattan from  
the South Mound of Fresh Kills  
Park, July 2009.  
*Robin Nagle / Lower Manhattan  
as seen from Fresh Kills  
Park / 2009 / photograph /  
[dimensions?]*

at Fresh Kills, but this time the charges included a tight schedule for bringing the landfill into compliance. In 1991, Edgemere landfill in Queens closed. Incinerators were already in decline as public protest against them grew, and the city's last three closed in the early 1990s.<sup>31</sup> Fresh Kills became the city's only option for disposing of household waste.

In 1995, Staten Island officials sued. Fresh Kills, they argued, violated the city charter's 'fair share' provision of the federal government's Clean Air Act. At the same time, the state legislature entertained bills mandating the landfill's closure by 2002. A few months later, the governor, the mayor and the borough president announced that the landfill would close by the end of 2001, a goal signed into law in June 1995. There was no alternative garbage management plan in place. The closing date was mostly arbitrary, but it let conservative mayor Rudolph Giuliani pay a debt. Staten Island, the least ethnically diverse and most conservative borough in New York, had awarded him huge margins of victory in both his mayoral bids. Without an overwhelming majority there, it is unlikely that he could have carried his first or second election.<sup>32</sup>

Because the decision to close the landfill was political (despite the sound arguments of the Staten Island lawsuits), knowledgeable sources scoffed that it would not be shut down. There was no other place to put the trash and no coherent plan to find one. Despite predictions, however, and months ahead of schedule, the last tugboat pushing the last barges set off from a marine transfer station in Queens on a rain-drenched Thursday in late March 2001. When it arrived five hours later, the last building block of an extraordinary piece of architecture, constructed across more than half a century, was loaded into Payhaulers and sent up the hill.

Fresh Kills is one of the largest landwork structures in the history of humankind and for years was the largest landfill in the world. It spans nearly 2,200 acres, about two and a half times the size of Central Park. It comprises 6 per cent of the land mass of Staten Island, and until a methane retrieval system was initiated in 1998 it generated 6 per cent of the nation's and fully 2 per cent of the world's methane. It is criss-crossed by fifteen miles of roads and bridges. It cannot be seen in its entirety from the ground, but only from the air; in fact, it is visible from space to the naked eye.<sup>33</sup> It holds approximately 108 million tons of trash and still has an

estimated 80 million tons of remaining capacity.<sup>34</sup>

The city's municipal garbage is now exported upstate, out of state, out of the region. For the first time in its history, New York has no place for its own trash. The cost of exporting has pushed the New York Department of Sanitation's annual budget above the one billion dollar mark. Rudy Giuliani's successor, mayor Michael Bloomberg, announced a twenty-year Solid Waste Management Plan that includes using the city's existing marine transfer stations, which are to be retrofitted to accommodate the necessary technology, to compact trash into containers. These will be loaded onto barges and shipped to transfer stations in New Jersey and elsewhere, and then sent to landfills. The city must also ramp up its recycling efforts; new processing facilities are planned in several locations.

The Solid Waste Management Plan was fiercely debated for several years before it was approved in 2006, and it still has big gaps, but one thing is certain: the garbage will keep coming. And regardless of pressures in the future that might advocate reopening Fresh Kills, at least one section of the landfill will never again receive trash.

### Fresh Kills: memorial ground

One of the many arresting features of Fresh Kills is its view of lower Manhattan. Sketched delicately against the horizon, the city's skyline seems a hazy Oz from the landfill's austere hills fourteen miles distant. Workers on Fresh Kills watched both planes hit the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001 and saw the buildings fall. They knew what was coming. Even before official word arrived, they started readying Section 1/9, the largest and last-closed face, for the new loads. There was no other space in the city that was big enough and – just



as importantly – that could be sealed off and secured for the ensuing criminal investigation and retrieval operations.

The first wreckage arrived by truck in the early hours of 12 September, but the Department of Sanitation soon had out-of-commission barges back in action and opened several marine transfer stations within days. At the height of the operation, more than a thousand people representing nearly twenty-five different city, state and federal agencies worked around the clock at The Hill, as it was now more tactfully known. A ceremony marking the end of the sorting process took place on 15 July 2002. By early August, the last piles of bent I-beams and tangled reinforcement bars were heading to recyclers.

The idea of leaving any of the World Trade Center material at Fresh Kills compounded stunned public disbelief and incomprehension in the days immediately after the attacks. Initial reports suggested that debris would be sifted at Fresh Kills and then taken elsewhere for burial, and city officials were careful to make no commitment about where the wreckage might finally end up. But it was gradually clear that it would be too costly to move the million-plus tons a second time, and Fresh Kills became the final resting place.

One of the workers sifting the rubble suggested that a memorial to the attack victims become part of Fresh Kills' future. He said he was glad that the remains of the buildings were staying inside the borders of the city. Outrage was immediate. 'I really do believe that for the sake of their souls and their families, to have the "Dump" be a Memorial is a disgrace,' wrote one woman on the local newspaper e-mail forum that evening. '... Please don't even consider such an idea of this sort, the dump is the "DUMP!"

'I agree with you,' replied another, 'who in the world came up with that idea? a garbage dump as a memorial to the HEROS!!! [sic] my God what were you thinking?'<sup>35</sup>

But one person intimate with Fresh Kills had a different reaction. 'One can view with horror the decision to place what I consider sacred material on top of something profane,' wrote Nick Dmytryszn. 'I do not.'

Dmytryszn is the environmental engineer for the Staten Island borough president's office and thus has been a long-time student of the landfill. He continued:

This section of landfill is scheduled, as per the law, for final closure. In simple terms, closure involves first placing down *clean* soil, followed next by an impermeable barrier, to be then all covered with another thick layer of *clean* soil. Thus what was enacted to protect the environment is now very relevant in protecting and respecting the final resting place of so many of our dead. Fresh Kills has now become a part of the landscapes of every American.<sup>36</sup>

### Fresh Kills: a new commons

Such divergent perspectives point to the volatile politics of memory that already marked Fresh Kills. It serves as an immense, inadvertent museum, with countless objects preserved until the future possibility that they are excavated, scrutinised, maybe even catalogued and displayed. It is a monument to what sociologist Wayne Brekhus calls the 'unmarked' material relations of everyday life.<sup>37</sup> But now it also serves as a memorial to profound tragedy.



As part of her *Touch Sanitation* performance, Mierle Laderman Ukeles started each day at the early morning roll call in a different sanitation district, inviting the workers to participate by saying, 'I am not here to study or to watch you. As a maintenance artist, I am here to *be with you*, to thank you for keeping New York City alive.'  
*Mierle Laderman Ukeles / Touch Sanitation Performance: Sweep 7, Staten Island, 6:00 am Roll Call, 1977-80 / photograph / 60 x 90 inches*

It became both museum and memorial by default. We had nowhere else to put our trash, and never worked much to diminish its quantity, so in our need for the 'away' of throw-away society, we invented Fresh Kills. We had nowhere else to put the wreckage from the World Trade Center, so out of necessity for space and security, we transformed Fresh Kills – a name too horrific to say in the days immediately following the attacks – into The Hill (even as the Trade Center site was called Ground Zero and, later, The Pit).

But these seemingly contradictory functions are not so surprising. Since its inception, Fresh Kills has commemorated many things. Its existence allowed the citizens of New York to live at breakneck speed without having to change consumption habits or consider that the 'away' is always a real place. From its start until its closure, it represented not only the prevalent solid-waste disposal technologies of the day, but it also helped advance the science of landfill design. Measures taken to bring the landfill into compliance with federal law in the mid-1990s required the Department of Sanitation to create complex engineering and infrastructural interventions on an unprecedented scale; many of these are now gold-standard choices for disposal operations around the world.<sup>38</sup> Today, as Freshkills Park, it continues to be a centre of significant innovation as environmentalists work to build an ecology rich with plant and animal life.<sup>39</sup>



More than 1,200 vehicles destroyed in the World Trade Center attack in 2001 are piled in heaps at Fresh Kills landfill.  
*Susan Watts / Crushed and Charred Civilian Vehicles at Fresh Kills Landfill / 2002 / photograph / [dimensions?]*



An FBI agent wears a protective suit and gloves as he examines debris from the World Trade Center attacks at the Fresh Kills landfill, looking for evidence, property and the remains of victims.  
*Michael Falco / Fresh Kills Landfill with Debris from the World Trade Center / 2001 / photograph / [dimensions?]*

It is made of four huge heaps of objects we classed as untouchable, consigning them to uniformed workers who took them 'away'. Now it is also forever linked to the history of a horrific event. We reject the former, masses of things that we decided to separate from ourselves. We passionately embrace the latter, memories of victims who could have been any of us. The biography of Fresh Kills always pointed to lives lived fully, richly, even to excess, and now that biography includes the remains of a violence excessive beyond comprehension.

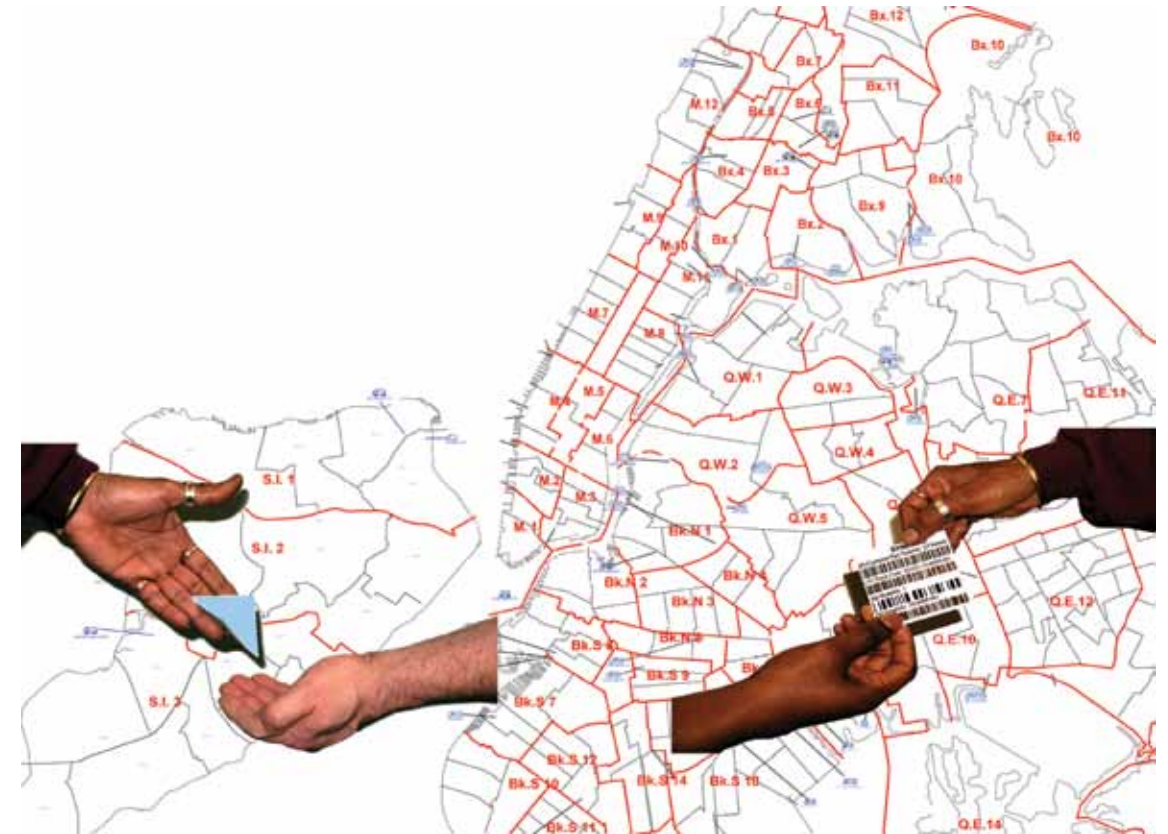
Anthropologist Mary Douglas reminds us that the sacred and the profane are both segregated from the larger society; both are marked by special places and require particular behaviours.<sup>40</sup> Landfills are designated locations for things we no longer want and that can therefore qualify as profane. Often a landfill can be forgotten once it is covered over and turned into something else – a golf course, say, or a park. But landfills like Fresh Kills are too big to ignore, and so they pose a continual cognitive dissonance. They betray the lie of the 'away'. They confront us with part of the real physical cost of the way we organise our material lives.

Whether or not we acknowledge some of the more difficult lessons of a landfill, it is a geography with much to teach. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, artist-in-residence for New York's Department of Sanitation since 1977, knew Fresh Kills intimately while it was still a landfill. In 1989 she was commissioned to contribute to its ongoing transformation and has been deeply engaged in that work ever since. Through a variety of media, with a consortium of city agencies, and for a range of audiences, she is realigning public understandings of what Fresh Kills was, how it came to exist, and what it can become. Ukeles proposes new and radically compassionate understandings of our relationship with this land. She reminds us that Fresh Kills was created collaboratively by every person whose discards rest within it. She invites us to consider that the connections we have with our material world are already wider than we know; whether or not we recognise it, we are forever bound to landscapes like Fresh Kills.

Ukeles does not work alone. A group of dedicated Department of Parks and Recreation staffers is focused exclusively on Fresh Kills; a fundamental part of their mission is a concerted and creative public outreach campaign. James Corner Field Operations, the landscape architecture firm selected as the site's planning and design consultant in 2003, has been crafting 'a new paradigm of creativity and adaptive reuse'.<sup>41</sup> And the Department of Sanitation, which built the underlying infrastructure across half a century knowing that one day it would become public space, continues to help navigate the dynamic geography of a closed landfill.

No one can heal land that has been claimed for a landfill; Fresh Kills will never again be the salt marsh that it was before 1948. No one can restore any city that has suffered cataclysmic attack to a present in which that event didn't happen; New York will never be the same as it was before 11 September 2001.

We can, however, accept Ukeles's invitation to acknowledge what landfills allow us, to recognise ourselves within them, and to see them for the futures they help create, not just for the pasts in which they were difficult spaces. We can acknowledge the visionary efforts of the teams at Parks, at Field Operations, and at Sanitation to reconfigure Fresh Kills. And we can celebrate the fact that, when landfills are closed, we have the chance to bring our most thoughtful efforts to their future by not forgetting what is in them, nor who shaped the hills where children can gambol, runners can sweat, picnickers can ward off ants, aching citizens can mourn – where we can create a commons for all to cherish.



Mierle Laderman Ukeles' 'Public Offerings Made By All Redeemed By All' proposal aims to transform the social meaning of the new Freshkills Park site through asking some of the millions of New Yorkers who contributed over 150 million tons of garbage to Fresh Kills Landfill to contribute a small object of value to permanently reside on the site in an act of renewal and respect.

*Mierle Laderman Ukeles / Public Offerings Made and Redeemed By All / 2000–2006 / detail of one donor citizen out of one million releasing an offering and receiving a barcode receipt from the city*



The view from the South Mound of Fresh  
Kills Park, facing north-east, July 2009.  
*Robin Nagle / Fresh Kills Park / 2009 /*  
*photograph / [dimensions?]*