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A New Postindustrial Nature: Remembering the Wild Waterfront of Hunters Point

Daniel Campo

Abstract

This essay explores engagement with postindustrial landscapes and conceptions of nature at Hunters Point, a formerly vacant waterfront site in Queens, New York City. Chronicling and documenting a number of appropriations and transgressive practices at this postindustrial site, it argues for the necessity of vacant spaces within dense contemporary cities, like New York. Vacant or marginal spaces, particularly those on the water's edge, offer opportunities for environmental engagement that are not available in traditional or emerging parks and public spaces, and speak to basic human impulses or needs to convene with the natural environment in which we live.

The End of a Waterfront Wilderness



Fig. 1. Chance Ecologies participants perform “For Grieving the Loss of a Wild Landscape,” on the Hunters Point peninsula, Queens, New York City, 2016. Photo credit: Daniel Campo.

In waning January daylight as the winds gusted off the river saturated with the wet flakes of winter’s first snowfall, we hopped a fence at the south end of Hunters Point South Park and onto the last remaining strip of a once extensive waterfront wilderness. Crossing the edge of one of New York City’s largest construction sites, our intrepid group made its way up a rocky hillside well dotted by trees and weeds albeit in their shrunken winter form, along with piles of rocks, chunks of concrete, construction debris, garbage and dumped objects. We took stock of what was left of our anarchic playground: a forty to eighty foot wide swath of rugged shoreline, most of which was perched atop a steep bluff and separated from the construction site by a chain-link fence. In a clearing overlooking an intact stretch of concrete bulkhead and a long abandoned float bridge below we gathered to remember the events of the year past. The seawall and area around the float bridge had been a particular locus of our activities. Extending out from the seawall, the well rusted, partially-sunk float bridge, perhaps last used 40 years ago in its intended purpose was now a visually splendid ruin, forming the foreground of a striking riverside tableau with the towers of Midtown Manhattan in the distance, twinkling in twilight. Around an old heavy bollard, now improbably some 20 feet above the level of the bulkhead or a missing pier to which it was once affixed, our group gathered in a circle for the performance of “For Grieving the Loss of a Wild Landscape” (Fig. 1), a participatory ritual created by Allison Danielle Behrstock in collaboration with Catherine Grau:

Dear Land,....
This day we make you aware of our sadness, knowing your loss is ours.
We pressed our feet against you, and you supported us.
We crouched, amidst your living beings, and you embraced us.

We paused and laughed under your leaves, and you sighed and sung with us.
Through soft voices made of brambles, branches, rocks and vines.
The wind knew us together, the weave of our footprints, our quiet amidst
yours.
There is no forgetting, thank you for your largesse.
Thank you for troubling yourself to grow amidst our stale detritus.
You our hearts' wishes and sheltered our weakness.
Thank you.

The performance, repeated again at sunset—at an abandoned campsite deeper into “the Woods” of this waterfront, represented the closing notes of a perhaps 40 year period of sometimes spectacular but mostly quite ordinary engagements with nature on Hunters Point, the part natural and part built peninsula that forms the southwest corner of the borough of Queens (Fig. 2). This 20-plus acre wild site was by January 2016 was just a fraction of what it had been four months earlier. The waterfront’s redevelopment into apartment buildings and a waterfront park was already well underway, and had obliterated the naturally evolved features of this landscape inland. The sleepy city was waking up and the wave of development had swept through New York City’s waterfronts and adjacent, working class neighborhoods had finally reached this proverbial hole in the donut.



Fig. 2 Hunters Point offered visitors an often sublime mix of nature and urban, 2015. Photo credit: Daniel Campo.

The performance also marked the end of *Chance Ecologies*, a public art project sponsored by the Radiator Gallery of Long Island City (Queens) and curated by Catherine Grau, Nathan Kensinger and Stephen Zachs, at Hunters Point. We performers—trespassers in the eyes of the city—were only one of the many constituencies who appropriated this waterfront since its progressive abandonment by industry and maritime commerce, beginning in the 1960s. View seekers, dog walkers, picnickers, anglers, sunset watchers, urban explorers, BMX bikers, birders, naturalists, and star-gazers as well as local youth

looking for secluded social spaces for transgressive or not-so-transgressive activities also enjoyed this postindustrial edge. In the more distant past, this swath of waterfront had been the site of the massive Jack Frost sugar refinery, which closed in 1964 and gave way to a New York Daily News printing plant and the silos of the Norval Concrete Corporation (1965-1989, demolished 2003-2004). Around the refinery once ran the tracks of the Pidgeon Street Terminal (closed 1977), which operated the rusted float bridge below us and for over three-quarters of a century provided one of Long Island's principal freight rail connections to the mainland of the United States via barges across the harbor (Parkhill and Gray, 19, 21; "Palmer's Dock, East River Terminal Railroad and Brooklyn Eastern District Terminal").

Why should we lament the loss of this landscape, when many people, including most members of New York's professional development community, considered Hunters Point to be nothing but a large vacant lot that has stubbornly resisted redevelopment for decades? Why should we lament the loss of this waterfront when the development that will replace it is part of the Hunters Point South plan, which will include 3,000 affordable housing units (out of 5,000 total), a new public school, retail space and a 10-acre waterfront park, spread over 30 acres across from midtown Manhattan (New York City Economic Development Corporation). Years in the making, the plan, an extension of the larger Queens West redevelopment, has been lauded both for its substantial public purpose and the quality of its architecture and has already delivered a handsomely designed and popular five-acre first phase of the waterfront park (Thomas Balsley Associates, landscape architects) and hundreds of affordable housing units (Fig. 3) (Davidson). In a city that has grown by nearly a million people in the last two decades, where nearly every underutilized property is being sized up for luxury housing development by the real estate industry, investors and speculators, the loss of a few acres of overgrown, postindustrial wilderness seems like a minor casualty. Yet it is also fair to ask what is lost when such spaces are redeveloped and to question larger assumptions that value vacant places only for their potential for future development.



Fig. 3. The popular first phase of Hunters Point South Park, 2015. Photo credit: Daniel Campo.

Large urban vacant places, particularly those at the water's edge provide a particular form of urban nature that cannot be found in the great Olmstedian oases, such as Central or Prospect parks. Nor can they be found in nature preserves, wildlife refuges and recreation zones, such as Gateway National Recreation Area, which hugs the ocean-facing shores of southern Queens and Brooklyn and the eastern shore of Staten Island. Finally, the nature of urban vacancy is not the novel nature of artfully crafted urban parks built on or atop former industrial and infrastructural works or military sites, such as New York's High Line, Brooklyn Bridge Park or "The Hills," a newly created parkscape on Governors Island southeast of Lower Manhattan. Vacancy provides a different nature; a set of evolving ecologies that defies conventional paradigms and offers opportunities for environmental engagement that are not available in any of these traditional or emerging park venues.

In this essay, I explore the urban nature of the Hunters Point waterfront wilderness site (not to be confused with the formal Hunters Point South Park that lies just to the north). As a participant-observer, I draw upon my own experience and the works, programming and documentation created by Chance Ecologies artists; and I reflect upon longer, more popular patterns of public use at this site as a means to better understand the urban nature of vacant places, particularly those located at the water's edge. While the great revival of New York's waterfront that began several decades ago and has resulted in the construction of several new parks, the public has also lost something in this reclamation.

Hunters Point, in its marginal, postindustrial form, spoke to basic human impulses or needs to convene with the environment in which we live. It offered a compelling mix of four overlapping natural qualities: elementality, wildness, pliability and duality. These qualities, engaged and exploited by Chance Ecologies artists and regularly enjoyed by a much broader audience, are sometimes available in the city's waterfront parks as well as those inland, but few if any simultaneously possess all four. In sum, these qualities enable a nature that is intimate, visceral, spirited and unpredictable and invites actions that are difficult to do or cannot be done elsewhere. Nurtured by abundant vacant land for decades, New Yorkers and city dwellers across North America have taken this form of urban nature for granted. Now as these spaces are redeveloped and replaced with structured urban uses, it is an ideal moment to assess what we have lost in losing the vacant space of the city.

Elementality

For decades, Hunters Point was one of the few places along the entire eastern bank of the East River where Queens or Brooklyn residents could access the water's edge and experience intimate contact with the immutable elements of nature—earth, sun, air and water. Unfettered access to all of these natural bodies or systems simultaneously – the elements that define life on earth—enabled a near immersive nature experience even as this landscape was littered with ruins, debris and garbage. Hunters Point was where you could feel the sea

breezes, smell the sea, see and hear the movement of the water, and if you waited long enough, experience the ebb and flow of the tides.

While much of the site's waterfront did not offer particularly easy physical access to the water itself given the steep, growth-covered bank that sat between the bluff and rough riprap, there was an accidental sand beach (sometimes disappearing at high tide) located below the bulkhead in a partially protected cove south of the Float Bridge, which could usually be accessed with a short jump. This was an ideal place to take your shoes off and get your feet wet, skip rocks, fish, launch or land a small boat; or enjoy the movement of the water lapping up against the stones, concrete chunks and weathered driftwood. It was also an excellent spot to observe the repeated dives of a cormorant in search of its next meal or watch a kingfisher sitting on an old pier piling patiently awaiting a similar opportunity snag a fish swimming too close to the surface of the water. The wide bulkhead above the beach was a similarly excellent spot to sunbathe or have a picnic, or simply take in the views sitting comfortably with feet dangling over the wall's edge (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. The accidental beach at Hunters Point was an ideal place to land a boat while the bulkhead above an excellent place to relax and take in the views, 2015. Photo credit: Catherine Grau.

Another spot near the mouth of the Newtown Creek offered a different form of intimacy. Riprap made touching the water here more challenging, but this clearing, about as close to the point of Hunters Point as one could get, provided among the most commanding waterfront vistas in all of Queens. A single view down the East River incorporated all three Brooklyn-Manhattan East River bridges (with the sharp bend in the river to the west at Grand Street, this is a rare ground level vista) as well as the Lower Manhattan skyline, and farther out, Governors Island and the Statue of Liberty. Looking northwest, the same point provided a stunning view of the midtown skyline. The vista to the southeast along the Newtown Creek itself also afforded a visually sublime mix of

bridges, elevated roadways, old factories, warehouses, and refineries and the digester eggs of the Newtown Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant, along with new residential buildings rising on both sides of the creek. This clearing was also ideal for observing celestial movements; its remote location, somewhat removed from streetlights, enabled star or moon gazing for those intrepid enough to brave the site after dark.

With its west-facing waterfront, Hunters Point was also an ideal place to watch the sunset. Indeed, the inaugural Chance Ecologies event was a public sunset viewing (Fig. 5). Posters placed on the streets of Long Island City invited public participation, and the event began with an artist-led, silent walk to another clearing atop a small hill marked by a flagpole (no participants knew the origin or purpose of this flag pole on this artificial hill in the general area of where the Norval silos once stood). More generally, the soft afternoon light, filtering through the trees and tall grasses in some places, made the site an ideal place to savor the hours before dusk.



Fig. 5. A Chance Ecologies event participant convenes with the elemental during a sunset viewing, 2015. Photo credit: Nathan Kensinger.

The combination of robust access to the tidal waters of the East River and dramatic, open views in three directions, along with ample access to the day and night skies, also provided a sense of elemental geography unlike few others on all of Long Island. Hunters Point is the westernmost point of Queens and its artificially created bluff overlooks a water body directly connected to the Atlantic at both of its ends. This provides a palpable sense of being at the edge of a landmass perhaps not all that different than being at other end of Long Island, looking out over the Atlantic from the bluffs at Montauk Point. (New Yorkers sometimes forget that Brooklyn and Queens are indeed on Long Island.) The enduring winds, while not quite Montauk grade, were usually stiff enough

to provide a commensurate sensation and complement the commanding views over water. While this perspective, which I (and others) enjoyed on many occasions, was probably not explicitly appreciated by all those who gazed out over the water from this spot, it was a thrilling feeling nonetheless.

Wildness

The defining characteristic of Hunters Point was its wildness in both ecological and social senses. Nature at this site was uncontrolled, uncertain, uncultivated, unregulated, unexpected and often the opposite of what could be experienced in the formal parks to the north. And wildlife flourished here: the site's dense and sometimes overwhelming greenness was a rawer form of urban nature, one allowed to evolve over the course of the seasons, years and decades without a guiding human hand.

Emerging from a combination of hard and soft ground conditions where the "soil" was often no more than crushed concrete or other demolition debris, was a hearty and surprisingly varied uncultivated plant life. Where this soil was the best and deepest (perhaps being "backfill" or soil dumped from a long-ago excavation elsewhere), Poplars, Mulberry, Ailanthus, and Honey Locusts reaching heights of 30 feet created a generous canopy that ran along the edge of the bluff and down the more gently sloping inland edge of this area often called "the Woods" by Chance Ecologies participants (Fig. 6). The impressive size of the trees and extent of the tree cover was best seen from the water – from the deck of the passing East River Ferry, whose dock was just two hundred yards north of the Woods. Underneath these uncultivated trees were dense thickets of thorn-covered bushes and various grasses. On the interior of the site, where there were no mature trees and the ground consisted mostly of construction debris and wastes, these thick and seemingly impassable shrubs predominated along with tall, stalky grasses.



Fig. 6. "The Woods" at Hunters Point featured a generous canopy and thick underbrush, 2015. Photo credit: Daniel Campo.

The dense, lush and diverse ecology of plants and some animals, well adapted to harsh conditions, complimented other natural aspects of the site. Overgrown nature, resurgent nature or uncultivated nature excited visitors and offered opportunities for environmental engagement that were not available in the waterfront parks to the north, even where the shoreline had been restored to some “natural” condition with native grasses or where the seawall had been replaced with a gently sloping rocky or sandy edge. The salubrious effects of this verdancy in combination with the elemental in a location that at times felt far from the city, connects us to the larger course of human history when our conception of nature was more closely tied to the everyday intimacy with the sun, air, water, the earth and those things that grow from it. And without some of the distraction and busyness of contemporary life, this was an ideal place to retreat, relax, escape or get in touch with ourselves or our thoughts and feelings. Those that visited in 2015 were often seeking out these conditions, which facilitated this physical and mental separation from the urban, not unlike trips to nature sites from the city.

Plant life at Hunters Point was often immersive, physically challenging and drew upon all of the senses, including those that have been suppressed or internalized by their regularity that we are barely conscious of them. The gentle swaying of the grasses in the summer produced a pleasing sound even as it was frequently interrupted the sound of planes and helicopters overhead and the rumble of marine engines from the water. Likewise, many human-induced sounds, including the snap of woody shrubs or brush underfoot were also pleasing in their way and were perhaps unusual to the ears of urban dwellers.

Hunters Point also offered opportunities for tactile and kinetic experiences that might be lacking in formal parks. Its unavoidable lushness provided a range of sensations gained from moving through dense areas of plant life, while the variety of ground conditions, often cloaked by growth, challenged the footing of visitors. Chance Ecologies public programming exploited these conditions in ways that heightened or highlighted the rediscovery of tactile-kinetic sensations. One such program, the Endangered Surfaces Walks, led by artists Ellie Irons and Chris Kennedy, engaged the sometimes lost sense of tactility underfoot. The walks, which encompassed both the first phase of Hunters Point South Park and the informal wilderness site to the south, enabled participants to become aware of tactile sensations and confront the differences between purposefully built and “rewilded” surface textures, using charcoal and paper.

On the same afternoon as the first Endangered Surfaces Walk, I led “Accidental, temporary and wild: An unguided tour of the Hunters Point waterfront” in which participants were given a simple map and asked to explore the site on their own, coming into direct contact with abundant natural and not-so-natural features (Fig. 7). As participants made their way across the wild expanse, they had to step through dense thickets, maneuver around piles of debris and dumped objects, many of which were now engulfed with weeds, or consciously plan their steps to avoid slipping down the embankment to the river. Upon completion of the tour, participants gathered at the above mentioned clearing near the end of the peninsula with excellent views and

celestial access. At this spot under the soft, late afternoon light, filtered through August haze, they reflected upon their intimate, unmediated and immersive experiences, including possibly forgotten tactile sensations, even if they were not entirely pleasant (Fig. 8). The swath of wilderness they had cross was part natural and part urban but had effectively blurred these conceptions to the point that they were indistinguishable.

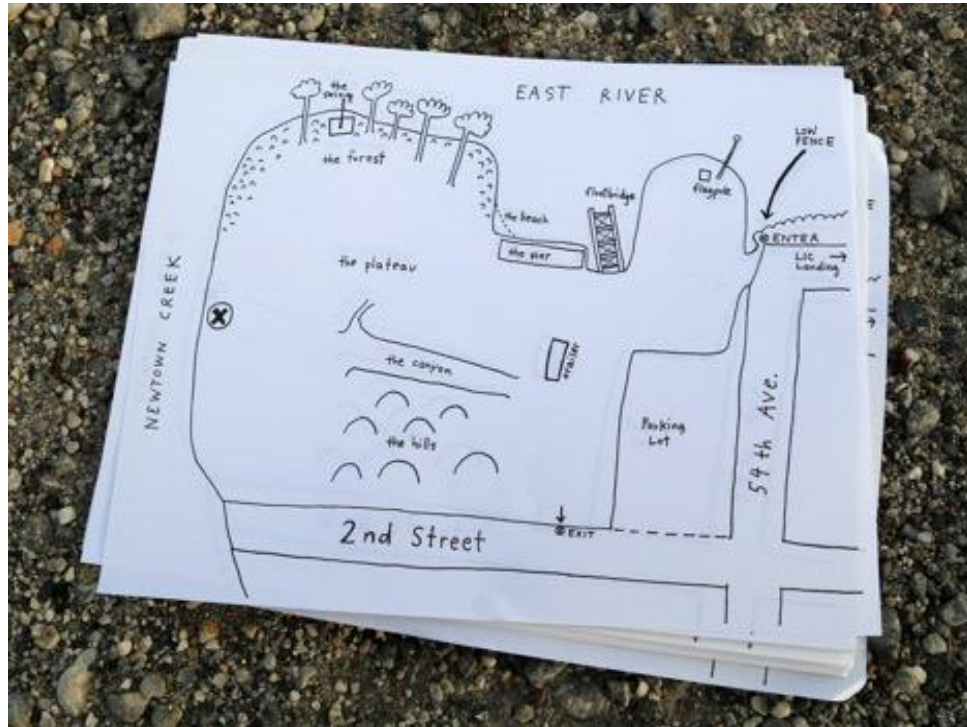


Fig. 7. The map created by Catherine Grau and given to participants in the author's "Unguided Tour," 2015. Photo credit: Catherine Grau.



Fig. 8. “Unguided Tour” participants gather to enjoy the view and evening ambiance and discuss their nature experiences, 2015. Photo credit: Catherine Grau.

An unknowable number of other visitors to Hunters Point South over the years had encountered similar conditions, particularly in the summer, and perhaps appreciated a state of nature that wasn’t always relaxing, comfortable or safe. Hazards, natural or otherwise, were not limited to stands of thorn-covered bushes but also included poison ivy, mosquitos, wasps and other biting or and stinging insects, rodents, pollen and allergenic plant matter, hidden depressions, unstable surfaces that give way under the weight of feet, sharp objects, broken glass and all manner of wastes. This area was neither safe nor secure, and this was part of its appeal.

The unguided tour also incited a social dialectic around legality, risk and the nature of public versus publicly-owned space. The Hunters Point South property was city-owned but not fully public, and those who entered from the legal park to the north had to confront a prominent “No Trespassing” sign and then hop a small fence. There was also access from a gap in a vehicular gate but it was well exposed to the street or potentially security guards in the construction trailer at the edge of the site. The low fence was more discreet and was a relatively easy hop, aided by some cinder blocks placed next to it. Yet one person upon seeing the fence had a bit of a panic and said she was not properly prepared for such an adventure. The fence was not merely the first (and far from the most difficult) physical challenge of the tour; it was also a test of one’s willingness to break the rules. Once the fence is hopped, in defiance of a clearly communicated public warning, a consciously law abiding citizen must confront the legality of their own action. Will they be arrested or given a ticket if caught by security or police on the site? If they have an accident will municipal emergency services respond promptly? Eventually, this person was coaxed and helped over by other participants but her unease persisted. She avoided the most impassable parts of the site, which she noted in dialogue later.

Conversely, other participants felt a certain thrill in this relatively minor transgression from the rules of the city. Empowered by a dynamic in which others were doing the same, it perhaps gave them the courage to do something they might have not done on their own. One of the themes raised by Chance Ecologies participants was that their own acts of appropriation done in concert with others, was a form of resistance to the real estate interests that were transforming the city around them and made a publicly-owned but inaccessible space truly public. That which had long been outside the conventional political, economic and social geography of the city had been made more regular, more orderly through the presence of many people and their activities; and what had formerly been mysterious, unknown or dangerous was now less so. The geography now made more sense, and participants saw not just disconnection from the prosperous and orderly city to the north but also continuity.

Much of the horticulture that visitors to Hunters Point South confronted and many found so pleasing consisted of plants that were non-native, meaning not natural to this part of North America prior to European colonization, for New York City, before 1609. These “invasives—the the pejorative term by which they are commonly called (many are also described by the catchall of uncultivated and unwanted plants, “weeds”), spread quickly in natural and urban areas. Hearty invasives overwhelm native species and in some contexts may damage overall ecology or endanger human investments. An anathema to contemporary park management, cities such as New York spend untold sums to remove or suppress the spread of non-native species. In cultural terms, their nonnative status trumps the naturalness they possess, and thus their presence in a park or garden and their brazen spread across both natural and thoroughly urban places suggests illegitimacy. Their rapid appropriation of vacant lots, have made invasives a symbol of urban decay and the disorder such decaying places usually conjure.

Yet value judgements about nonnative species and the places within cities that they are found are mostly cultural rather ecological. This is the implicit argument of artists Ellie Irons and Anne Percoco in their “Next Epoch Seed Library,” which gathers and catalogues the seeds from the rich cornucopia of invasive and native uncultivated species at Hunters Point and other “rewilded” sites in the city. On the surface, the library makes apparent the stunning beauty and variety of many of nonnatives, including Dandelion, Lamb’s Quarters, Shepherd’s Purse; and weedy natives, such as Morning Glory, Golden Rod and Evening Primrose. In collecting and preserving a contemporary horticultural heritage rather than some idealized version of the species that predominated before European settlers, industrialization, globalization and bioengineering; and those species in particular that are “most likely to survive and thrive in a landscape dominated by human excess,” Irons and Percoco have inverted the cultural ideal of landscape ecology and question practices that seek to destroy these plants and restore urban places with native species (Next Epoch Seed Library). In doing so they are part of a small, but growing countermovement of naturalists, ecologists and landscape theorists. Weeds, as British naturalist, Richard Mabey (20) similarly notes, “green over the dereliction we have created” and their ability “to grow in the most hostile environments—a

bombed city, a crack in the wall—means that they insinuate the idea of wild nature into places otherwise quite shorn of it.”

Social wildness was also an essential aspect of the nature of Hunters Point. Lacking conventional constraints, physical (design) and administrative (park rules, supervision and security) that restrict public behavior, visitors were free to engage in numerous activities that are prohibited or discouraged in city parks: risky, dangerous or destructive play or the use of dangerous play objects; fires, loud music, drinking alcoholic beverages, smoking marijuana, fishing, boating, feeding wildlife, graffiti and vandalism. But this landscape invited both destructive and constructive acts, and the options for creative or compelling forms of play were many and often of a variety not typically found in a city parks.

The joy of exploration and discovery, and thrill of confronting danger, uncertainty and vigorous physical challenges were part of the implicit appeal for those who came to play at this wild site. Neighborhood youth and others were compelled to climb on the derelict float bridge despite or because of the challenges and potential danger it offered. Other visitors used the float bridge as an elevated viewing platform above the water and took in the commanding perspectives it provided. Likewise, many visitors enjoyed exploring the hidden or seemingly forbidden spots such as an abandoned trailer, which was sometimes used as a hideout by neighborhood kids and possibly as a shelter or sleeping quarters. Participants also attempted to revive an old rope swing, installed on a tree deep into the Woods and wondered about the circumstance that had delivered and flipped a now a half-buried and well-stripped automobile in a nearby rocky crevice. In coordination with the Long Island City Community Boat House and the North Brooklyn Boat Club, participants and others paddled to and landed at Hunters Point South, and explored the site from the water.

In anarchic space, human wildness can take many forms and include those activities that might be considered antisocial, menacing, violent or predatory – including prostitution, IV drug use, homeless encampment and illegal dumping. Yet by 2015, these sorts of incidents were far fewer than they might have been decades ago. The city was safer and more orderly, and the nearby (mostly) middle- and upper-middle-class residents, mostly from the residential towers of Queens West, had evolved into the site’s largest constituency, and engaged this landscape peacefully. Ironically, the great safety and security of New York in the 21st century perhaps made this site more appealing. It was a quixotic reminder of the older, “badder,” and perhaps more provocative city and its waterfront.

Pliability

While providing a robust sense of wild nature, Hunters Point was also highly pliable. It was open grounds for a variety of itinerant or renegade constructions and creative acts, and offered space-starved city residents opportunities to freely arrange, assemble, build, repair, tinker, deconstruct and destroy, and to move, alter or make insertions into the earth. As the copious

fragments of itinerant constructions (including the rope swing and adjacent campfire circle), fading graffiti tags, and a number of unusual artifacts suggest that Hunters Point was the site of an unknowable number of creative gestures and happenings over the decades, most of which are undocumented and have left few if any traces.

Hunters Point functioned as an outdoor studio, workshop, laboratory, gallery and performance space and offered great quantity and variety of both natural and urban materials (however these terms are defined), most of which would soon be removed, recycled, reprocessed or cleansed. Visitors exploited these materials, using them as play objects and in constructions, installations, investigations and performances. Many of these works were small, temporary and often quite personal. You did not have to be an artist, have artistic credentials or skills, or explicit creative intent to make things in this vacant landscape. But anything created today could be gone tomorrow – artists and others needed to have an explicit comfort with this environment, which encouraged both constructive and destructive acts.

As Chance Ecologies participants discovered, found media could be used in a near infinite number of ways and through a variety of creative strategies and tactics: environmental art, street art, found object art, performance art, auditory art, and public workshops and theater. In 2015, their installations and programs often explored a complex, and at times, contradictory material history and reflected upon the urban practices which created and recreated this peninsula, including landfill, mapping and subdivision, development, property assemblage, demolition, clearance, redevelopment, abandonment and decay. In “Dock Street Dig,” Matthias Neumann and Scott Schwartz explored these pliable layers in an investigation of a long lost public right-of-way. The team excavated three sites in the Dock Street right-of-way, which had been mapped in an extension of the landmass in the mid-19th century but was later subsumed by the growth of the sugar refinery that was once adjacent to it (Fig. 9). Somewhat similarly, Edmund Mooney explored Hunters Point’s historic pliability in his investigation of the pre-urban or early urban form of the peninsula. His public “Impossible Shoreline Walk,” attempted to reveal lost topography by tracing underfoot the unextended, pre-urban edge of Long Island (even as this path passes through impassable buildings and infrastructure), while listening to contemporary field recordings from Hunters Point wilderness.



Fig. 9. Participants in a public investigation of the former Dock Street right-of-way, 2015. Photo credit: Catherine Grau.

The socially pliable conditions also enabled acts of discovery at greater scales and perspectives, including Laura Chipley's kite mapping project and Sarah Nelson Wright's collection of video and sounds that would eventually become a virtual-reality gallery installation. Using a solar powered transmitter from top of the hill with the flagpole, Dylan Gauthier's "Stolon Station" broadcasted pirate radio to the immediate vicinity. Gauthier's "stolon" was inspired by the rapid spreading of horizontal stems or shallow roots of an insurgent plant to form new plants at this site. During a late summer listening party, Hunters Point field recordings were broadcasted along with interviews and other auditory portions of Chance Ecologies programming (Fig. 10).



Figure 10. A pirate radio listening party at Hunters Point, 2015. Note the use of the float bridge in the background. Photo credit: Daniel Campo.

Hunters Point was part of a larger and longer New York tradition of the appropriation of vacated industrial or post-maritime waterfront space for creative activity pursued mostly by unauthorized agents. I documented some of the social history of one of the most prominent of these wild sites, the Williamsburg (Brooklyn) waterfront (whose creative heyday was the late 1990s and early 2000s) in *The Accidental Playground* (Campo, *The Accidental Playground*). Additional sites of this nature include Hudson River Piers in Lower Manhattan in the 1970s, Socrates Sculpture Park (Queens) beginning in the 1980s, and several less prominent waterfront sites across the city's five boroughs (Campo, *Brooklyn's Vernacular Waterfront*; Cooke and Crimp; Seccombe; Socrates Sculpture Park;). All of these places demonstrate a vitality not usually associated with abandonment and decay, and a form of pliability that exceeds simply moving natural materials around.

Much like these other waterfronts sites, Hunters Point functioned as an artists' playground and has helped redefine the experience of public art in the city. Indeed, when development began on one of these more prominent vacant sites, the Battery Park City Landfill, Creative Time moved its annual "Art on the Beach" to Hunters Point for the summers of 1987 and 1988 (Creative Time). Hunters Point was in some respects robustly public, even as the number of participants and audience sizes were small. This was not necessarily art for the masses but works embodied an open and engaging spirit, involving artists, co-conspirators and their audiences (some members of whom were happenstance participants) in a way that eludes both more conventional venues and programs. In an age where public art programming at the waterfront is now a well-planned and celebrated ritual of summer in New York City and helps promote neoliberal development practices, Hunters Point was a reminder of the more anarchic art at abandoned waterfront sites of a previous era. Rawer, less expensive and less calculating, this art involved none of the international art stars that have graced the city's waterfront in recent years (e.g. Duke Riley's "Fly by Night" at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in 2016 and Kara Walker's "A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby" at the site of the former Domino Sugar Factory in 2014, both sponsored by Creative Time; and Olafur Eliasson's "New York City Waterfalls" in 2008 at various locations on the East River, sponsored by the Public Art Fund). No ticketed events to waterfront spectacles; no multimillion dollar installations, no illuminated birds, no RSVP systems or online waiting lists, no liability waivers to sign, no onerous prohibitions or rules to follow, and no years of planning and public permitting procedures. This was public art for everyone (or at times, no one).

Duality

Nature at Hunters Point was a complex and sometimes contradictory mix of both the natural and built worlds, a palimpsest of multiple pasts and presents, available for local practices and appreciation by a variety of protagonists. Its textures, surfaces and visual perspectives offered a provocative mix of the city and nature, land and water, decay and resurgence, foreground

and background, of being both separated from *and* right in the middle of America's largest and most dense city. This "dialectic" or "duality" of nature provided a context and structure for human use and enjoyment of this waterfront site (Krauss 289, Flam xiii-xv). It possessed an "otherness"—it was a site where time had seemingly stopped; a holdout from a quite different New York City, before the construction of all the waterfront parks and condominium towers, and the rapid rise in measures of the city's prosperity, safety and vitality. Hunters Point seemed to be simultaneously the essence of the city and the essence of the city's opposite.

Some of the most striking and encompassing dualities involved the passing of time and the unfolding of simultaneous or overlapping histories: natural history, histories of urbanization and industrialization, a history of failed plans (the site was to be the Olympic Village in New York's unsuccessful bid for the 2012 Summer Olympic Games) or plans that failed to materialize; histories of decay, resurgence, reinvestment and rediscovery by the global real estate marketplace; and histories of everyday use by nearby city residents and others. The great play of the past and present and the uncertainty of the future gave additional poignancy to activities at the site. Like the appropriations, insertions, encampments and experiments that occurred on the Williamsburg waterfront of the late 1990s-early 2000s, this palpable sense of the impending end gave creative constructions and expressions a greater sense of immediacy if not urgency.

By summer 2015, visitors knew or sensed that Hunters Point would soon be radically transformed and that its future form would neither resemble its historic, productive past nor its ruinous or verdant present. One day the bulldozers *would* show up but when exactly—September 1? January 1? Next August? The site's owner, the New York City Economic Development Corporation, was not saying. Somewhere far from Hunters Point, an unknown number of opaque administrative actions were playing out: construction permits, financing and money transfers, agreements with development partners or contractors, completion of architectural drawings, minor authorizations and reviews. When all of these actions were completed construction could begin. But until that day visitors would continue enjoy this site.

The planning of one particular Chance Ecologies event brought this immediacy and duality into focus: Raphaele Shirley's "Pink Smoke Final Test – Attempted signaling from Hunters Point," a performative observance of the end of Chance Ecologies' engagement with the site. This gesture, response or "S.O.S." to the imminent clearance of the wilderness was to involve the coordinated lighting of 60 pink smoke flares by volunteers stationed at various points on 2nd Street, along the site's edge. The smoke from the flares would be captured on video from a rooftop in nearby Greenpoint, Brooklyn, where the participants would eventually gather to see the site from this visual remove, watch the sunset, see the rise of the super moon and then later take in lunar eclipse, all of which were to occur on this Sunday September evening.

Yet on this day when the celestial bodies were literally aligned, the conditions on the ground and water were not so copasetic. Provocative appropriation of public space is inherently risky; one involving combustible

materials is even more so. Across the river, the United Nations was in session and world leaders were gathering in anticipation of the week's events. With heavier than usual Coast Guard and police presence on the river, the specter of even the smallest disruption of order in the vicinity of the U.N. could be perceived as a potential act of terrorism. The curators and artist struggled in recalibrating their own comfort with uncertainty, risk and the potential consequence of staging an unsanctioned public spectacle at this moment of heightened security; ultimately they decided to postpone the event. The security-obsessed real world had pierced the seemingly well-insulated Hunters Point wilderness site. The foreground had been swallowed by the background; a fragile duality had collapsed. Renegade art had been tamed and anarchic possibility was preempted by something larger and more powerful.

The End of Postindustrial Wildness

Pink Smoke was rescheduled for a month later (when I was out of town) and went off without incident or confrontation but also without the same sort of cosmic harmony (or dissonance) and sense of urgency it might have had a month earlier. Meanwhile the clearance of the site for formal development was proceeding. By January 2016, the time of the Radiator Gallery's Chance Ecologies show and final programming at Hunters Point, much of the wilderness had been cleared. By the spring, clearance was complete; the once wild site had ^{been} denuded, reduced to a prominent brown mound on the waterfront topped only by construction equipment. Hunters Point had been reclaimed from the urban wilderness.

The new landscape that is beginning to take shape on the Hunters Point site will bring its own form of vitality, and many if not most of those who live in this part of Queens will not lament the loss of the wild landscape it replaced, particularly those who will be the residents of the affordable housing units. Likewise, Chance Ecologies participants individually and collectively grieved for the loss of their nature site, yet they have moved on to find postindustrial wilderness elsewhere. In conjunction with the Queens Museum's summer 2015 programming, this public art project is appropriating residual and postindustrial nature spots along the Flushing River and Newtown Creek. Even as the number and size of the city's vacant spaces declines, there is seemingly always another frontier. Wild nature is resilient and always finds a crack or seam in the carefully-planned works of the metropolis. Yet cities do need large vacant places and the wild nature they provide – they are reserves that offer respite from the urban and remind us of our humanity and our place in this world and in the larger cosmic order of the universe.

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