Shifting Discourses in Landscape
Exploring the value of parks in New York City

Philip Hutchinson
University of Canberra
Philip.hutchinson@canberra.edu.au

Dr Andrew Mackenzie
University of Canberra
andrew.mackenzie@canberra.edu.au

Urban parks are valued by residents and tourists alike as they are a pleasant juxtaposition from the intensity of the surrounding city. But parks haven’t necessarily been considered in the same economic or political terms as other parts of the city. In recent years, the potential of urban landscapes to contribute to the economic health and vibrancy of the city has become more apparent to the political elite in the higher profile parks such as New York City’s High Line Project. However, some aspects of the political role that urban parks play still have not been recognised. Contrary to the economic value that has been attributed to some other high profile parks in New York City, the cost of Freshkills Park is enormous and this suggests that there are other political narratives associated with the closure of the landfill and the creation of the Park. That is, the Park offers some form of political value to the New York City administration.

This paper situates the history of Freshkills Park in recent political and environmental events that have impacted New York City. The closure of the Fresh Kills landfill and associated waste management problems for the city, the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre and the 2012 Superstorm Sandy, are events that reveal the political positioning of Freshkills Park. Not only does this raise the profile of the Park in the minds of the residents of New York City, it also increases the Park’s relevance to the political elite by revealing some of the issues that are impacting the welfare of the city. By examining the relationship between these events and conception of the Park, this paper considers the value of Freshkills Park as a political object in the city, and thereby, offers a different conception of the role and value of landscape in a modern city.

Keywords: Landscape architecture; Freshkills Park; Biopolitics
Introduction

New York City (NYC) is one of the world’s most vibrant and dense cities. Land is expensive, creating an interesting relationship between parks and the city. In one sense, the real estate value of the land creates intense pressure to use land productively; but, the intensity of the land use means that parks are more valued as a temporarily escape from the intensity of the city. Currently, twenty-five percent or 52,000 acres of land in NYC is dedicated to parks, reflecting the commitment that recent administrations have made to parks. Previous NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg had committed to the goal that by 2030 every New Yorker will live within a 10 minute walk of a park (Bloomberg 2011, New York City Department of Parks and Recreation 2014: 1). This has been reiterated by the current de Blasio administration (New York City Office of the Mayor 2014).

Attitudes to parks in NYC are rooted in iconic parks such as Central Park and Prospect Park that encapsulate a certain romantic discourse of landscape design. Recent additions to the assemblage of parks in NYC, such as the High Line, have also shown how parks can contribute significantly to the economic welfare of the city. The economic benefit of parks to the city cannot be the only measure of value from a political administration perspective. Other measures that determine the value of parks include the opportunity for exercise, community interaction and ecological functions (New York City Office of the Mayor 2014, 34). But when the full opportunity cost of building and maintaining parks is taken into consideration, the gap between the cost of parks and the value to the community appears a little incongruent. This paper argues that this gap can be explained through the political capital that is gained from parks, and this becomes evident by examining the commissioning and development of Freshkills Park.

Twentieth Century Account of NYC parks

One of the primary roles of Central Park and other early parks in New York was to provide a space that had an “overall impression of tranquilly beautiful and ruggedly Picturesque rural scenery” (Rogers 2001, 339), that provided the “best practicable means of healthful recreation for the inhabitants of all classes” (Olmsted Sr 1973, 44). Parks were situated within prosaic notions of experiencing ‘nature’ for the enlightened middle class. From these romantic beginnings, the role of parks evolved and by the early twentieth century, functional requirements of parks in NYC took precedence. Social reformers of the Progressive Era (1890-1920), and later Robert Moses, head of the city’s Parks Department from 1933, promoted parks for specific recreational activities such as swimming pools, bowling, croquet and tennis (Rogers 2007). The progressive era approach to parks was to see them as spaces in which organised activities could be provided for a population that now had more leisure time than ever before (Cranz 1982). However valuable parks became as a recreation resource, they were not immune from funding cuts. By the 1960s, the wholesale middle-class flight from the inner city, made it more difficult to justify park funding(Cranz 1982). This was exacerbated during the fiscal crisis of the 1970s. As the city was almost bankrupt, spending money on parks was a low if not non-existent priority (Serazio 2010). Central Park, among others, fell into decline as a result. Any perceived benefits of living near the Park were eroded by the rise in criminal and antisocial activity in the park itself. It was a place into which few were willing to venture (Rogers 2007, Vanderkam 2011: 1). Figure 1 shows the degree to which the condition of the park deteriorated as infrastructure was neglected.
The meadows were bare, compacted and with standing water because of the collapsed drainage system. (Source: Rogers, E. B. (2007). "Robert Moses and the Transformation of Central Park." Site Lines: A Journal of Place 3(Fall): 3-12.)

Work to restore some of Central Park’s original character did not gain traction until NYC Park’s Commissioner Gordon J. Davis and Founder of the Park conservancy Elizabeth Barlow Rogers were able to provide an alternative private funding source to state revenue (Vanderkam 2011: 2). It was only through the creation in the 1980s of the not-for-profit Central Park Conservancy that Central Park could be restored (Vanderkam 2011: 2). Funded privately through donations, the capital raised to maintain Central Park has given a financial measure of the value of Central Park to New Yorkers. Since then, funding has largely been secured for Central Park by private contributions. The Central Park Conservancy raises approximately 75 percent of the funding for the Park’s annual funding (Central Park Conservancy 2015), of which around 85 percent is private funding that comes from people living within ten minute walk of the Park, firmly establishing a social and economic co-dependency between the Park’s fortunes and the residents who benefit (Vanderkam 2011: 1).
Figure 2: The High Line, New York City

Relatively free of visitors on this day, the High Line is the most visited park in North America, attracting 600,000 visitors per acre per year. (Source: Photo by Philip Hutchinson, 10 May 2014.)

More recently parks have been viewed as opportunities for economic revitalisation and a number of interesting projects have emerged based on reclamation of post-industrial sites (Kirkwood 2001). The Bloomberg administration was particularly active in creating a number of other high profile developments in the city including High Line, Brooklyn Bridge Park and Governors Island. The High Line for example is a ‘linear park’ created on the remains of a disused, elevated goods railway line ten metres above street level on the western shore of Manhattan Island (see Figure 2). The economic benefits of the project have been extraordinary and the west side of Manhattan has been transformed from a “once-gritty, truck-filled area” into an precinct “now dominated by upscale fashion retailers, art galleries and restaurants” (Gratz 2010, xxxv). “Over $2billion in economic benefits [are] tied to the High Line, which is a combination of tourism money, visitation money in galleries and restaurants and hotels, and economic development in terms of new building, new residents and new businesses moving into that part of the city” (Corner 2014, personal communication, 21 May 2014). From a low point in the 1970s, parks have once again become an integral part of the city. The political benefits of parks are once again being recognised, from the perspective that parks have a positive effect on the economic health of the city.

However, not all parks do well under conservancy funding models. Most parks located in areas that are not surrounded by wealthy benefactors struggle to attract necessary funding (Arden 2010, Doulis 2010), and consequently draw from the purse of the administration which can struggle to maintain
all of the parks in the city, especially those without additional private funding. In 1996, over one third of money given to conservancies went to Central Park and approximately 8.1 percent of funding went to the top five parks (out of 41 parks) (Citizens Budget Commission 2007, 26). The problem faced by New York is that “no other parks system in America relies as much on other people’s money” so that “half of the city’s 1,800 parks and playgrounds now depend on some type of private group for maintenance, according to the Parks Department” (Arden 2010).

Political History of Freshkills Park

Freshkills Park (FKP) is located on the western edge of the borough of Staten Island, on the former Fresh Kills landfill site, the world’s largest rubbish tip and the last to operate in New York City. It is approximately three times the size of Central Park at 2200 acres (890 hectares). The Park’s design is based on the 2006 master plan design, Lifescape, derived from the winning competition concept design entry by Landscape Architecture firm Field Operations. Even though sections of the Park have been constructed, the Park has not been officially opened to the public to date.

Figure 3: Fresh Kills circa 1947


Before the landfill was established in the late 1940s, Fresh Kills was a stream that flowed into a tidal wetland. The name ‘Fresh Kills’ was given by the Dutch who were the first Europeans to explore the area – the word ‘Kill’ is derived from the Dutch for river. It was apparently a beautiful area (see Figure 3). Frederick Law Olmsted argued in 1871 that the location was sufficiently beautiful that it should be “developed into a series of ‘water preserves and public commons’” (Staten Island Improvement Commission 1871, Greene 2013). In 1948, the city began dumping rubbish on the wetland to fill in what was considered as waste land so that a parkway between Brooklyn and New Jersey could be built; followed by housing and industrial facilities (Miller 2000). As the landfill grew,
it began to impact the lives of many Staten Islanders, both physically by its presence, and the all-pervading stench (see Figure 4).

![Figure 4: Fresh Kills circa 1950](http://photos.silive.com/advance/2011/03/125yr_3_overview_landfill_fres.html, accessed 12 December 2015.)

The environmental impact that Fresh Kills landfill had on the community of Staten Island were well known to the city administration. It was perhaps the psychological impact that the landfill had on Staten Islanders that was most significant. Other boroughs looked down on Staten Island as it was known primarily as the borough with the city dump. Staten Island became known as the forgotten borough as former Borough President Guy Molinari complained the landfill “was atrocious and I always got the feeling that people in the other boroughs did not give a damn about us” (Levison 2012). Despite repeated promises to close the Fresh Kills landfill, it was not until 1998 that Mayor Rudi Giuliani gave a firm promise to close the site (Staten Island Advance 2013). Fifty years of inaction and broken promises to close the landfill, finally ended.

The political nature of the decision to close the landfill cannot be underestimated. The decision to close the landfill, made in 1996, was only possible when a rare political alignment of politicians from the same party holding office at the borough, city and state government levels were elected - Rudi Giuliani as Mayor, George Pataki as Governor and Guy Molinari was Staten Island Borough President (Miller 2000). A referendum for secession of the borough from NYC was conducted during the 1993 election that brought Giuliani to power (Molinari 2001). Giuliani attributed his victory to Staten Island, stating in 2008, “when I got (sic) elected Mayor of New York City ... the place that kind of won the election for me was Staten Island” (Kramer and Flanagan 2012, 10). “There was a political debt there to pay” argues the former Staten Island Borough Parks Commissioner, Tom Paulo (2014, personal communication, 6 May 2014). Adrian Benepe, Commissioner of Department of Parks and Recreation during the time of the establishment of Freshkills Park, was more circumspect about the
reason for the political decision to create the park. The politicians understood that there a sense of 

social justification because Staten Island had borne the brunt of accommodating the problem of 

disposing of the city’s waste (Benepe 2014, personal communication, 6 May 2014). Other factors 

such as the recognition of environmental damage and social equity issues also played a part (Benepe 

2014, personal communication, 6 May 2014, Paulo 2014, personal communication, 6 May 2014, 


Despite some obvious limitations to develop the site resulting from the landfill mounds, a park was 

not the only option considered. The trash mounds represent about 45 percent of the site and the 

remaining 55 percent of the site is made up of creeks, wetlands and dry lowland (New York City 

Department of City Planning 2013: 2). Joshua Laird, Commissioner of the National Parks of New York 

Harbor Philadelphia and former planner with the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation 

during the time of the establishment of FKP argued that “normally any sizeable parcel of land 

becoming available in the city, instantly people would zero in [on]” the potential use of land for 

“development potential” for a range of different uses (Laird 2014, personal communication, 20 May 

2014). Despite pressure to develop the site for commercial operations, the decision to construct a 

park was a politically obvious and popular option for the administration. Subsequently, there was 

“no in-depth analysis” and “no study or assessment” for alternatives (Laird 2014, personal 

communication, 20 May 2014). In the end the decision to create a park was political expediency, it 

was “basically made as a Mayoral decision” (2014, personal communication, 21 May 2014).

Whether known or not, once Fresh Kills landfill was closed, NYC had no way of dealing with the 

rubbish generated within its municipal boundaries, and therefore the cost of rubbish removal almost 

doubled (Gamerman 2012, Rosengren 2015). As soon as the capacity of Fresh Kills landfill was 

reduced and ultimately closed, the city entered into expensive contracts to export rubbish to landfill 

sites down the eastern seaboard to Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina and Virginia (Miller 2000, 

Gamerman 2012, Nagle 2014, personal communication, 13 May 2014, Rosengren 2015). The cost of 

rubbish removal from NYC is “staggering” (Nagle 2014, personal communication, 13 May 2014), 

argues academic and author, Robin Nagle. It is estimated at almost $368 million in 2016. In effect 

the closure of the park magnified the problem of waste management. The costs associated with 

rubbish removal has been a logistical and financial problem for many years and since the closure of 

the landfill, the exporting the city waste interstate has become environmentally and financially 

unsustainable (Rosengren 2015). Management of the residual waste since the closure of the landfill 

has also presented significant logistical challenges. The half a century of accumulated waste has 

been capped by an impermeable plastic membrane and covered with soil. The landfill is in the 

process of being decommissioned by the NYC Department of Sanitation – a process that will take 

approximately twenty-five years – and the rubbish will remain permanently hidden beneath the 

surface.

Once the decision was made, the political expediency shown in closing the landfill and subsequent 

decision to create the largest park in NYC culminated in the launch of a design competition, 

coincidentally one week before the terrorist attacks on the world trade centre now known as 9/11. 

Although these events are unrelated their trajectories overlapped in the following decade in ways 

that shed light on a tumultuous decade for the city and the park.
Lifescape: The winning competition entry for Freshkills Park.

On 5 September 2001, the NYC launched an International Design Competition for Freshkills Park. In December 2001, the three finalists were chosen with the opportunity to compete for the consultancy to produce a master plan for the Park. Field Operations, a landscape and urban design firm based in New York under the direction of James Corner, was awarded first place for their entry called ‘Lifescape’ which formed the conceptual basis for the Master plan completed in 2006. Field Operation’s entry, Lifescape, offered a comprehensive approach to deal with the size, scope, complexity and timing issues that the site presented. It attempted to create a world-class, large-scale park that capitalized upon the unique characteristics of its metropolitan location, vast scale, openness and ecology. The key design goals for Lifescape were captured within three coordinated organisational systems: habitat, program and circulation (New York City Department of City Planning 2013: 3). The programs organisational system involved creating a wide variety of public spaces and facilities. The Park plan offered the space for a range of activities and programs that are unique in the city. Activities were designed to be based around extensive active and passive recreation, educational amenities and cultural enrichment and include sports fields, canoeing, cycling and mountain biking, walking, community events, education, extreme sports, public art, horseback riding, bird watching and outdoor dining (New York City Department of City Planning 2013: 3). Activities such as canoeing and horse riding demonstrate the scale of FKP and the potential range of activities available. Activities such as community events, education, public art, bird watching and outdoor dining demonstrate that the role of FKP is being pushed into a wide range of other services.

One of the key challenges to implementing the design was providing a staged approach so that maximum public access to the site could be provided as early as possible while ensuring that such access could be done safely, and without affecting the ongoing landfill closure, maintenance and monitoring operations (Field Operations 2006: 1, 14). An approach was adopted that involved developing the park as a patchwork of projects that could be constructed through periods of intermittent funding but “add up to a unified whole” (Corner 2014, personal communication, 21 May 2014). In that sense, the master plan was less a completed vision for the park as much as it was a plan to manage the complexity of the task over a long time frame, with unsecured funding and tremendous site difficulties.

Laurie Olin, Landscape Architect and member of the competition jury, commended the approach by Corner as “a robust armature to accept the changes in understanding, the changes in social pressures and [changes in] economic cycles” argued (Olin 2014, personal communication, 16 May 2014). Lifescape was an unparalleled solution to the problem of creating a park at the site; set against the enormous difficulties, including the time frame over which the landfill decommissioning was to take place.

A Question of Value

At the time the Draft Master Plan was completed in 2006, Fresh Kills Park was envisaged to be built “in three ten-year segments at a cumulative cost of about $650 million” (Citizens Budget Commission 2007, 68). Of this, approximately $251 million was to be directed to closing the landfill and safely sealing waste. As to the Park itself, “$150 million will be used during the first ten-year
construction phase, $143 million for the second phase, and $80 million for the third and final phase” (Citizens Budget Commission 2007, 68).

The question of the value of parks comes into sharp focus when these direct and indirect ongoing costs are contemplated. Significantly, the opportunity cost incurred in not selling or developing land that could be built on, and the future maintenance cost incurred in maintaining such a large park are considerable. In a city famous for its capitalist spirit it seems counterintuitive that the cost burden on the whole city has been accepted without some sort of real estate or other return. The metrics of economic value – that is, the economic benefits that can be attributed to parks such as Central Park or the High Line – cannot be applied to FKP. This is not to say that other parks in New York attract similar funding as Central Park. Approximately 81 percent of funding went to the top five parks out of 41 parks (Citizens Budget Commission 2007, 26). However, the cost implications of Freshkills Park are of a higher order.

The cost of maintaining Freshkills Park will also be significant due to its size and is the biggest issue facing the Park’s administrator, Eloise Hirsh (Hirsh 2014, personal communication, 7 May 2014). In addition, the Park will struggle to attract significant private funding due its location, the stigma that is attached to the site and the comparative low density of Staten Island (Laird 2014, personal communication, 20 May 2014).

Part of the massive investment can be understood by the political role that the Park plays in promoting issues that are linked to the events and situations that threaten the state. In 2001, Lifescape, the competition winning design met the requirements of the brief, embodying many of the elements of discourse in parks that had evolved through Central Park and others, such as its social values, scenery, and space for recreation. Field Operations very much intended to hide the history of the site (Nagle 2014, personal communication, 13 May 2014). Reflecting a sentiment shared by some Staten Islanders, many of whom are still very suspicious about the site’s capacity to transform to a recreation space. However, between the competition winning design of 2001 and the completion of the master plan in 2006, the plan evolved through a process of consultation with the Staten Island administration, local residents and the NYC administration. While the general layout and key aims such as ecological outcomes, recreation and sports, space for arts, educational activities and events were broadly retained, there were key aspects of the park’s function that were altered.

The most significant change to Lifescape between the original winning entrants to the 20006 Masterplan emerging from the consultation process was the inclusion of renewable energy projects. While methane was always going to be produced at the site through the decomposition of the waste, the possibility of other sustainable energy demonstration projects that harnessed solar, wind, water and methane power was also raised in the public consultation processes. Wind farms were not included by Field Operations or at least did not feature in early renderings of FKP, but by 2006, they featured prominently. The possibility of wind farms and solar arrays at the site was raised initially by Borough President James Molinaro (Chan 2008), and reiterated by the next President, James Oddo. Deputy Borough President Burke suggests that the Borough President “felt that poetic justice and also a practical step forward” to find a way to produce clean energy at the site argued Deputy Borough President Ed Burke (2014, personal communication, 12 May 2014). It was felt that these experiments would give the Park a cutting-edge identity and augment its educational value
Currently wind turbines are being considered for the Park, and a solar array has been approved for installation in the coming years.

Introducing renewable energy production facilities at Freshkills Park also has a significant association with the threats of climate change (see Figure 5). Freshkills Park stands as a symbol of a response to climate change since Superstorm Sandy as it provided a buffering effect against the worst of the effects of the storm. Freshkills Park blunted Superstorm Sandy’s impacts on adjacent neighbourhoods (New York City Department of Parks and Recreation 2013: 1, 1) as it “absorbed a critical part of the storm surge” (Kimmelman 2012). While this was also true of other urban landscapes areas in New York, the wetlands in particular have subsequently been identified as essential natural elements needed to mitigate damage to property in the likely event of similar storms in the future. Hence there is a new resolve from the New York City administration to protect the wetlands and other natural areas because according to the NYC Mayor, “wetlands, streams, forests and other natural areas offer substantial sustainability and resiliency benefits” (New York City Office of the Mayor 2014, 199).

The relationship between the park and the sites landfill history also changed in 2001, due to the temporary re-opening of the landfill to receive the residue from the collapsed towers destroyed during the 9/11 attacks. The connection between the Park and the event is significant as the remains of the people killed in the attack will forever be contained at Freshkills Park. Indeed the 9/11 terrorist event is another example of how FKP has come to symbolise the vulnerability of NYC.
By locating the memorial of the collapse of the Twin Towers through a terrorist act in 2001, binds FKP with the discourse of the vulnerability of the state, not just NYC but all of the United States of America.

What has resulted is that Freshkills Park has become integrally associated with issues of waste, climate change, renewable energy and existential threats associated with terrorism. Yet the success of the Park will also depend on continued political support. At any stage funding could dry up (Benepe 2014, personal communication, 6 May 2014). Consequently the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation have the task of building support for the Park. The key strategic aim has been to change public opinion towards the site and part of that strategy is to engage in these bigger narratives associated with the site. This of course has political implications. The Park becomes a means of communication, and awareness raising about some fundamental issues that impact upon New York City. In that sense, the Park can be understood as a political tool – it has political value. Consequently, it represents the extension of landscape beyond a benign narrative into the realm of politics.

**Conclusion: The Changing Discourse in Landscape**

The introduction to this paper argued that landscape in New York City is often encapsulated by romantic notions associated with iconic parks such as Central Park and Prospect Park. While economic aspects are becoming more prominent, the larger political aspects of ‘landscape’ are often ignored. The political aspect of FKP emerged in part through the political circumstances around the closure of the landfill and the emergence of the park. Power relations crystallise out into different structures in different historical moments (Harrison 2012), and in this case, the structures of the effects of power are seen in the constitution of the Park. Different groups and people act upon the Park, changing the concept of a park, changing the discourse of the Park, from one like Central Park to something new and different, a park for the twenty-first century. This is perhaps not unexpected at FKP as it was borne out of the political turmoil of half a century of the landfill, and given form in light of the events during the first fifteen years of this century.

At Freshkills Park, discourses associated with aspects of politics have come to the fore and are linked to the value of the Park. The fears of the state in the modern age can be understood in terms of increasingly unpredictable natural forces, but also the accretion of landscape values by excess and waste. FKP embodies these fears and the hopes for an alternative future than the one that appears inevitable. FKP stands as a symbol of a response to the events of the twenty-first-century. This is where FKP separates from the discourse normally associated with parks and that exemplified by Central Park. As discussed above, this change in the discourse of parks was brought about by political aspects that have been a part of history of FKP and the Fresh Kills landfill. In that sense FKP is genuinely a twenty-first century park as it is a medium for the persuasive issues of the age. Understanding landscape within a political context adds scope and depth to perceived role and value of landscape in the modern city.
References:


Staten Island Advance 2013. From the Archives: Trail of Broken Promises Litters History of Former Fresh Kills Landfill. Staten IslandAdvance. 26 September 2013.
