

Northala Fields: Valhalla in the distance

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Abstract The reclamation project Northala Fields in the London Borough of Ealing represents a successful model of park design for the 21st century. The project combined an expansive earthwork with a practically functioning community green space at zero cost to the taxpayer. This paper explores not only the development of the park, but also the components that function in combination to generate the extensive community engagement and continual usage of the site. Northala Fields was a collaborative, interdisciplinary effort which follows a tradition of successful endeavours between artists and scientists, using new technologies to revitalise abandoned and contaminated sites. Several art/science collaborations are examined within the context of reclamation and creative innovation.

Keywords: *Northala Fields, earthwork, community engagement, phytoremediation, reclamation art*

INTRODUCTION

The word that best defines the London Borough of Ealing's new park, Northala Fields, is 'monumental'. From a distance, one can easily see the four great mounds, one with a distinctive spiral path, that form the centrepiece of the site, rising up out of what was once a barren, windswept, inaccessible tract of land adjacent to the A40 highway, besieged by the constant rumble of traffic and exhaust fumes of vehicles flowing into and out of London's central core. The mounds (Figure 1) are at the heart of a dynamic design developed by artist Peter Fink and architect Igor Marko of FoRM Associates¹ to create a park for the 21st century at no cost to the taxpayer.

The FoRM team envisioned a park

that would generate its own power, provide opportunities for multiple use, serve as a gathering place across generations, be an environmental educational hub, and support ecological habitats. The park would also be a work of art and inspire play and movement — an ambitious list of aims — and with the hurdles the team was to face over the next few years, it is amazing how many of those original ideas came to fruition. Fink and Marko also believed that the Northala project had the potential to be a new standard in park design so, even at the early concept stages, the team was looking for ways to integrate green technologies, educational innovations, community engagement and fiscal responsibility.

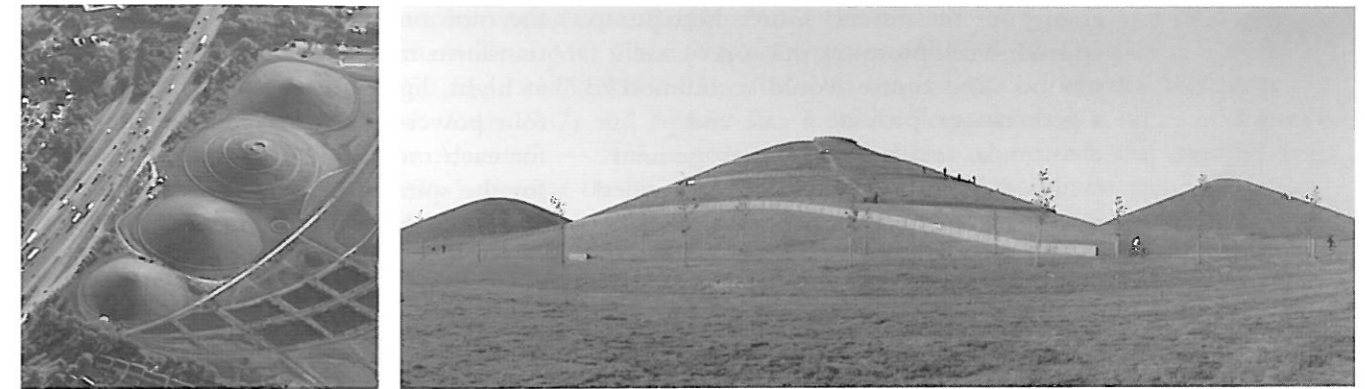


Figure 1: Two views of Northala Fields park (photos courtesy of Peter Fink, © FoRM Associates)

The final project is the culmination of hours spent working with local community groups, including fishermen who already occupied the marsh, parents, teenagers and environmental groups. This was not a typical community consultation, which too often consists of one meeting in the town hall and an unreliable questionnaire. Rather, FoRM worked directly with the community groups, listening to their needs and wants, guiding them through design exercises. The team consulted with the different groups individually, and then brought the groups together for further design exercises and consultation, a time-consuming process which ensured that each group was fully able to express their position and then work together to collaborate and arrive at a consensus. The result is a park which incorporates fully accessible fishing ponds, two children's playgrounds, a marshland reserve, a model boating pond, cycle paths, open playing fields and the four giant mounds. Yet, despite all these areas of different activity, the site design flows together and creates the sense of being one harmonious park. It is this sense of flow that insures against any one area of the park becoming neglected, isolated or 'dangerous'.

The funding of the £5.5m park was

also unique, generating both the income and the material to construct the mounds from the deposition on the site of 65,000 lorry loads of clean construction spoil from projects across London, including the extensive reconstruction of Wembley stadium, making the park the final resting place of the Wembley stadium towers. This process of claiming and reclaiming functioned not only as an economical model, but also as an environmental model. Many landfill sites for London-based construction are some distance from the city but, by using the Northala site, companies were not only able to contribute their processed fill to a location destined to become a green site, but they were also able to cut down on their delivery costs, time and miles travelled, resulting in less carbon emission. This 'twinning' of Northala with other local projects provided a mutually beneficial formula of deconstruction and reconstruction.

The development of the park was not without its difficulties, and a change in the council governance halfway through the project resulted in cutbacks and delays. For instance, the original plans for the park proposed that a visitors' centre would be integrated between two of the giant mounds, powered by ground coils buried under the mounds, producing

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energy for the ground source heat pump, and wind sculptures at the top of each mound. The centre would accommodate a park ranger, provide a café and classrooms, and house the management facilities. The council, however, decided not to install the coils (and installing them now that the mounds have been built would be cost prohibitive, as it would require extensive excavation to install, rather than the initial plan of integrating the coils into the construction of the mounds). The visitor centre was therefore postponed. In addition, the fishing ponds have not been stocked, and the IT infrastructure that the FoRM team originally envisioned would transform the park into a living classroom has yet to be realised. Yet, despite all the political infighting, the park has prevailed, it works, and this is almost entirely due to the design of the mounds.

MODELLING PRACTICE: A FORM OF INSPIRATION

What many Ealing residents may not realise is that not only do they now have a new park in their community, they also have a piece of land-art. This is not the first monumental earthwork to grace the UK's national motorways. Patricia Leighton's *Sawtooth Ramps* (1993) stretches along the M8 in Scotland and is just one of a series of artworks that make up the M8 Art Project. And while the Northala work is reminiscent of other earthworks such as Robert Smithson's *Spiral Hill and Broken Circle* (1971) in the US or Maya Lin's *11 Minute Line* (2004) in Sweden, it has the potential to be much more.

Earthworks are often in remote locations or entirely composed of natural materials and, as such, their appreciation is limited to daylight hours. Envisioning a work that could stand majestically by

the motorway during the day and transform into a completely other work at night, light artist Peter Fink designed four power-generating wind sculptures for each mound as well as blue lighting for the spiral path. Unfortunately, like the park, the original concept for the mounds was also curtailed by the change in council government. Fink was even approached by a power company that was willing to sponsor the lighting scheme. Politics, however, continued to chip away at the project, and the lighting of the land art was not installed, thus the full potential of the piece was never realised. It is a story that is unfortunately all too common in publicly funded projects.

In striving to offer more than just the aesthetics of a well-designed urban oasis on a discordant site, Northala Fields follows a model of innovation, conservation and collaboration between artists, scientists, engineers, planners and civic leaders across the globe. The past 40 years have heralded a succession of artists who have embraced site reclamation as a core value within their practice. From the mid-1960 through the 1970s, artists such as Nancy Holt (*Sun Tunnels* 1973–1976) and Robert Smithson addressed the issues of post-industrial environmental impact with works which responded to and highlighted the environmental assault via the viewer's experience of the work. This mode of artistic practice was followed by artists such as Helen and Newton Harrison (*Europe, Breathing Space for the Sava River, Yugoslavia* 1988–89), Mierle Laderman Ukeles (*Fresh Kills Landfill and Sanitation Garage* 1989–present) and Patricia Johanson (*Fair Park Lagoon* 1981), who combined both formal and symbolic aesthetics with systematic research. These artists also assumed additional roles such as environmental activist, cultural diplomat

and community ambassador. By the 1990s, artists such as Mel Chin (*Revival Field — Pigs Eye Landfill* 1990–93), Viet Ngo (*Devil's Lake* 1987) and Agnes Denes (*Tree Mountain — A Living Time Capsule* 1996–) were at the forefront of combining artistic aesthetics and applied research though collaboration with scientists, ecologists and community groups to offer practical solutions for site reclamation.²

Working in collaboration with Dr Rufus Chaney, Mel Chin's *Revival Field* was the first replicated field test conducted as an art installation in the USA.³ This remediation/art project involved planting hyperaccumulating plants to draw toxins out of the soil. At the time, phytoremediation⁴ was relatively new, and little was known about the effectiveness of the process. The project was funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and led the way to advances in what has become a viable industry for land reclamation.⁵ In *Revival Field II* (1984, Palmertown, Pennsylvania), a follow-up and seldom referred-to project, Chaney added an additional experiment to the process to explore the possibilities of 'in situ remediation' for lead contamination, which would allow for the alteration of risk without actually removing the metal from the site (Ref. 5, p. 415). Both Chaney and Chin were in agreement that the project would not be finished until *Revival Field* became 'a technology' (Ref. 5, p. 416).

The idea of an artist actively engaged in the business of reclamation and science may raise some scepticism, but the work of Viet Ngo is a model for a successful interdisciplinary practice which practically fuses art with science. Viet Ngo's artwork also involves the use of plants within a reclamation context. His 1987 work *Devil's Lake* used a commonly found plant, duckweed, to transform

wastewater into clean and safe groundwater. The project is a water treatment site which uses this plant technology through a series of serpentine channels and expands out over 50 acres of wetland. While the technology is intriguing, it is the artistic design and visual impact of the sites that promotes the community acceptance of Ngo's projects. The success of the *Devil's Lake* facility continues to attract ecologists, tourists and scholars, all interested in the fusion of art and science towards a practical end. By 2004, Ngo's company, Lemna (named after the Latin name for duckweed, *lemnaceae*) had over US\$2.5bn in water-treatment projects around the world.⁶

Community acceptance is a crucial component of any reclamation project; however, many artists strive to move beyond just community acquiescence to achieve not only community engagement, but also long-term stewardship. With *Tree Mountain — A Living Time Capsule*, Agnes Denes created an artwork that has actively engaged 10,000 people in a project that will last 400 years.⁷ The idea for the work was first conceived in 1982, but it was not until 1992 that Finland's Ministry of the Environment announced at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro that, as part of Finland's commitment to alleviating the world's ecological stress, the government would commission *Tree Mountain*. The site is an immense constructed mountain in a former gravel quarry in the town of Ylöjärvi. Ten thousand trees were planted by 10,000 participants in an intricate pattern designed by the artist, which was derived from combining the mathematical formula of the golden mean with the designs of a pineapple and a sunflower. As one of the world's largest reclamation sites (1.5 miles long and 0.15 mile wide), *Tree Mountain* has been declared by the

Finnish government as a national monument to serve future generations with a momentous inheritance of environmental engagement.⁸ Each of the 10,000 participants were issued with a certificate of ownership, so that each tree bears the name of the individual who planted it. Individuals can be buried under their tree, leave it to heirs or even sell it at auction; however, the tree itself cannot be removed, and *Tree Mountain* as a whole cannot be owned or sold, ensuring that the project continues through successive generations. Denes believes that 'ownership signifies custodianship' (Ref. 7, p. 391). While the ownership may change, the conservancy continues. It is this sense of custodial ownership that Fink and Marko have enthused within the community of Ealing.

MODELLING FUNCTION: A FORM OF GRACE

Northala Fields inspires movement. Unlike many of the royal parks dotted across Greater London, which seem to lull visitors into repose with their ubiquitous deck chairs, the design of this park seems to propel visitors into motion. On a recent visit to the park, the author watched as a woman in a pink sari ascended the easternmost mound. She carried a bright blue shopping bag. It made for a striking image, this solitary figure in billowing fabric striding up the newly worn desire path, the blue sack a vibrant accent against the pink cloth. She reached the mound, capped by a hood of well-trodden grass, paused momentarily to take in the view before she began her descent. A few minutes later, she was winding her way up the spiral walkway of the second mound. The soft crunching sound of her feet on the gravel path announced her imminent

arrival. As she reached the top, she walked around the outside of the rock-rimmed crescent, tracing the unseen final core of the spiral, until her feet came to rest at the top edge of the rock cage. There she took a seat, opened her blue carrier bag and removed a plastic container and a fork. She ignored the author's little party — two men in ties, Peter Fink with his incandescent glasses and orange shoes, and the author clad in a denim jacket and hiking boots. They were an odd assortment, and yet she took no notice. This was her park, her daily routine perhaps. The others were just visitors. She took a few bites from the container and, after a few minutes, she packed the mystery contents of the container back into her blue bag, stood, turned, and began to retrace her steps around the outside of the crescent to the path, then back down the hill. She passed the group without so much as a sideways glance. She disappeared around the curve of the hill, and the author turned back to the east to notice three women, possibly three generations, following the same course.

They trekked up the first mound together, a tight clutch of bodies, paused at the top taking in the view, strode down the other side, and proceeded up the spiral path. Upon reaching the summit, the group marched around the inside of the crescent without pause and looped back onto the path to spiral back down. Minutes passed, and they began the climb straight up the third mound, again following the traces of a desire path. The youngest woman led the charge up the hill at a brisk jog, the second woman followed at a steady measured pace, while the third and eldest of the three moved with more care, slowly working her way upwards. In the end, they settled on the grassy peak of the third mound, knees tucked up against their chests, gazing out over the



Figure 2: Climbing Northala Meadow Mound (photo courtesy of Peter Fink, © FoRM Associates)

fishing ponds and playgrounds of Northala — across the golf green and playing fields of the adjoining park, to the distant planes landing at Heathrow International Airport. They huddled together against the constant breeze, talking with their hands, occasionally pointing out some interesting landmark that had just come into focus within their expansive view. They were still there as the author reached the bottom of the spiral and, as she began to leave, another figure came into view from the east, halfway up the ascent, repeating the pattern.

Perhaps there is something buried deep within the human psyche that drives us to climb, to reach the top, knowing that one will just have to come down again. Whatever that something is, it has permeated the grounds of Northala and, on any given day, countless people

can be seen — seniors, mothers, young couples, lone joggers, groups of school children, and fathers and sons leading the charge up the mounds (Figure 2). Such scenes serve as reminders that land reclamation is not just about reinstating environmental balance; it is also about reclaiming the human connection to nature and the emotional well-being that comes with re-engaging with a restored landscape.

MODELLING THE FUTURE: A FORM OF PRACTICAL HOPE

So how does one define Northala Fields — municipal park, modern land-art earthwork or reclamation project, or a bit of all three? Can art meet function in today's public art climate of endless consultation and bureaucratic compromise, yet still create something

that is both useful and awe inspiring? Perhaps. Perhaps it could even happen at Northala, but it has not quite happened yet. Ealing Borough Council, however, still has the opportunity to seize the day — not just to have a visually impressive park, but to follow a vision that will allow notions of recreational space to be forever altered.

Hope is on the horizon, as there has been a change, yet again, in the council, and the success of the park, among both design professionals and the community, has put the park on the proverbial map. The council is reconsidering the visitor centre and talking with a local fishing charity to manage the fishing ponds. They are thinking of expanding the park to include an additional mound on an adjacent piece of land across the road, joined by a pedestrian bridge (an idea that originated with FoRM). Following the fiscally neutral formula, the new mound could generate income through construction-fill recycling to complete many aspects of this unique project. While there have been some missed opportunities such as the heat coils, which are now beyond financial reach owing to the expense of excavation, there is still a chance to turn back to the original design team and give Ealing a project that heralds the future. Hopefully the council will not make the mistake of trying to complete the project with 'bolt-ons' — a café by one architect, a bridge by another. One of the beauties of this park is that there is a sense of cohesion.

With Mayor Boris Johnson's approval of the 10m regeneration package for Ealing, there is now £250,000 in regeneration funds destined for the Northolt area. The current focus for these funds, however, is on the town centre and shopping areas rather than

completion of Northala Fields.⁹ While the regeneration of the shopping centre could bring benefits to the town, the success of Northala Fields could also be expanded upon to develop additional financial benefits through visitors from outside the area, attracted by this monumental work of land-art. The plan for completing the park already exists and, by taking a step back, the council could create a way for the entire community to leap into the future.

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