

The Ironic Nature Walk

By CHRIS RUEN MAY 8, 2009

AT the northernmost tip of Brooklyn, in the area east of McGuinness Boulevard, there is an industrial wilderness, a home for rumbling trucks and silent brick warehouses adorned with wooden signs and chipped paint.

But on the corner of Paidge Avenue and Provost Street, just a short distance from Newtown Creek, a boulder sits like a giant trail cairn. Down the block, shining silver gates mark the entrance to the Newtown Creek Nature Walk.

The nature walk occupies an unsavory wedge of land, stuck as it is between a sewage treatment facility and the infamous creek that separates Greenpoint, Brooklyn, and Long Island City, Queens, where decades ago more than 17 million gallons of oil seeped in from underground tanks. Yet, this contradictory nature walk, with its bleak concrete paths, holds truth for our confounding times.

Walking southeast from the boulder, an expanse of wastewater pools extend to your right. You may receive your first whiff of sewage as you approach the nature walk's tall entrance gate, which guards metal stairs and a wheelchair access ramp of tangled, Gehry-like proportions.

Heading up the steps, you follow a brutalist concrete pathway, on either side of which thick gray slabs bow out like a ship's hull, rising and falling.

Holes cut through the slab on your right are meant to mimic portholes. You look through one. Excited for natural scenery, you instead see a stretch of wastewater lagoons.

Disappointed and confused, you make a 90-degree turn to the left that reveals yet another landscape.

Heading along a straight path to the water ahead, the “nature” to be seen is strictly of the concrete, metal and glass variety. A sparkling new office building is visible on the right. An asphalt factory is on the left, along with rusty bulldozers that sit next to a conveyor-belt system bearing the word “Gencor” in large sans-serif type. The path allows unobstructed views not of hillsides or grassy fields but of trash, weeds and huge concrete barriers holding variants of sand and gravel.

Heading down to the creek, you finally see a tree. It is thin, fragile, lonely and encircled by granite stumps. Chiseled into the stumps are a variety of Native American words: “O jik ha da ge ga,” “Muscota,” “Mahicanituk” and “Mesaethes,” which, according to a little surfing on the Web, translate as “ocean,” “place in the reeds,” “river that flows both ways” and “great brook with tide.”

IT’S easy to imagine this untouched inlet teeming with fish, seabirds, herons and crabs, a vast wetland expanding into dense forests across Long Island City and Manhattan Island.

But why dredge up this appealing memory of the area’s natural beauty? Across Newtown Creek, all that can be seen are the graceless byproducts of urban development. The turquoise glass of the Queens Citicorp Building looks awful; it is architecture as toxic as its namesake’s credit-default swaps.

The Queens-Midtown Tunnel spits cars and trucks out to the Long Island Expressway. Along the highway, colonies of looming billboards patiently await some driver’s bored gaze.

Continuing east along the creek, you notice that grass is largely missing from this nature walk. That's by design; get used to concrete and gravel.

Wide steps descend into the water, providing access for brave fisherman and chemically immune kayakers. Be careful to avoid the combination of seagull droppings covering the steps from end to end and the dark sludge, risen with the tide.

The water is murky. On sunny days, dark, swirling rainbows of oil glide across the creek's surface. Looking downstream, you see the inspirational beauty of the Manhattan skyline. But this nature walk is more about what's in front of you, that which sustains the city.

There are birds, yes. A swarm of seagulls is in constant motion across the creek. They hover around a giant industrial claw that swings back and forth, filling a barge with scrap metal and impounded cars. This is where the building blocks of our civilization go to die, taken on a barge out to sea.

Walking along the water, you hear an aerated sucking sound, its source unknown. Muffled echoes from loudspeakers mix with clanking machinery, the screeching of hungry gulls and falling piles of scrap metal crashing across the water. Around every corner you find another emergency telephone — someone is very concerned about your safety here.

When we think of nature, we imagine ourselves alone, surrounded by untouched beauty, connecting with our collective memories of the world as it was at the dawn of humanity. But “nature” is also defined as a characteristic or state of things, and this alternate meaning carries its own weight.

The nature walk is itself a byproduct of industrial growth. When the city's Department of Environmental Protection approved a \$3 billion expansion for the sewage treatment plant, a fraction of the budget was set aside for artwork. The city also agreed to provide public waterfront access as a concession to the community. Nine years and \$3.2 million later, the nature walk was born. That

the pre-apocalyptic landscape of Newtown Creek, so unready for the spotlight, would be put on close display in the process was incidental.

Past the boulder cairn at Paidge and Provost is a symbol of who we are and what we have made here on earth, like it or not — an unusually honest space in which to contemplate the nature of our city and our civilization. As much as we have created the grand cultural playgrounds of Manhattan, we have also created the wretchedness of Newtown Creek. The two worlds need each other and cannot be set apart, though much of our economic system takes great pains to encourage the illusion that this is not the case.

As I left the nature path one day, I lingered at the granite steps. Suddenly, a creature popped out of the water in front of me, some kind of seabird, maybe a double-crested cormorant.

Long-necked, with a thin hooked bill, it dived into the creek. When the bird re-emerged, it had a small fish in its bill, struggling to break free. The cormorant flicked the fish into its mouth and swallowed it whole. I watched, entranced, as the bird moved slowly along the creek and toward the East River, diving again and again to explore the water's depths.

Nature has a way of surprising you.

A version of this article appears in print on , on page CY3 of the National edition with the headline: The Ironic Nature Walk.

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