

ENVISIONING ROSS ISLAND

Ross, Hardtack, Toe, and East Island sit smack in the middle of the Willamette River, just one mile south of the city's downtown core. Although these islands, (which are colloquially known as Ross Island) once measured a mile and a half long by a quarter mile wide, over 75 years of sand and gravel mining have carved them into a freshwater lagoon encircled by a thin arc of upland forest. After a lifetime of resource extraction, Ross Island is an **ALTERED LANDSCAPE**. Rusted pilings, abandoned machines, and corroded barges are scattered everywhere, and piles of loose sand and rocks line the hulking skeleton of mining equipment. But despite the aggressive digging and the discarded parts, Ross Island teems with wildlife: great blue herons nest on the northern tip; beaver and river otter occupy the edges; deer and raccoons inhabit the upland territory; and juvenile salmon migrate through the eastern river channel. All told, these islands are a complex **CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPE** where multiple histories, industrial activities, and wildlife habitats overlap and intertwine.

Ross Island's proximity to the heart of downtown makes it an even more compelling and important place. Although few Portlanders have actually set foot on it, the island is an **ICON** in our collective consciousness. Somehow we all care about it. Even those of us who don't know much about it, or who only see it for a fleeting moment from the highway, the bridge, or the trail. And though most of it is privately owned, we all sense that it is somehow ours – Portland's own wild island in the midst of its bustling metropolis.

These islands are simply too valuable as habitat to become a 'park' or recreation area, and are too filled with history and memory to become a typical urban wildlife refuge. With this abundant landscape, the question now becomes: **WHAT KIND OF PLACE CAN THIS BE?**

We are the Ross Island Vision Team – a self-appointed, ad hoc group who shares an enthusiasm for Ross Island – and this document offers our vision for its future. Though it is impossible to know the exact shape these islands will take, we hope this document will guide the types of futures that are possible here. Most importantly, we hope that our vision inspires others to see the deep potential in this incredible resource.

NOW IS THE TIME FOR DREAMING BIG.



Just one mile south of downtown Portland, the Ross Island complex is literally surrounded by the city. Bordered on the west by the South Waterfront development and on the east by the 160-acre Oaks Bottom Wildlife Refuge, this landscape is A UNIQUE MIX of urban and natural environments.

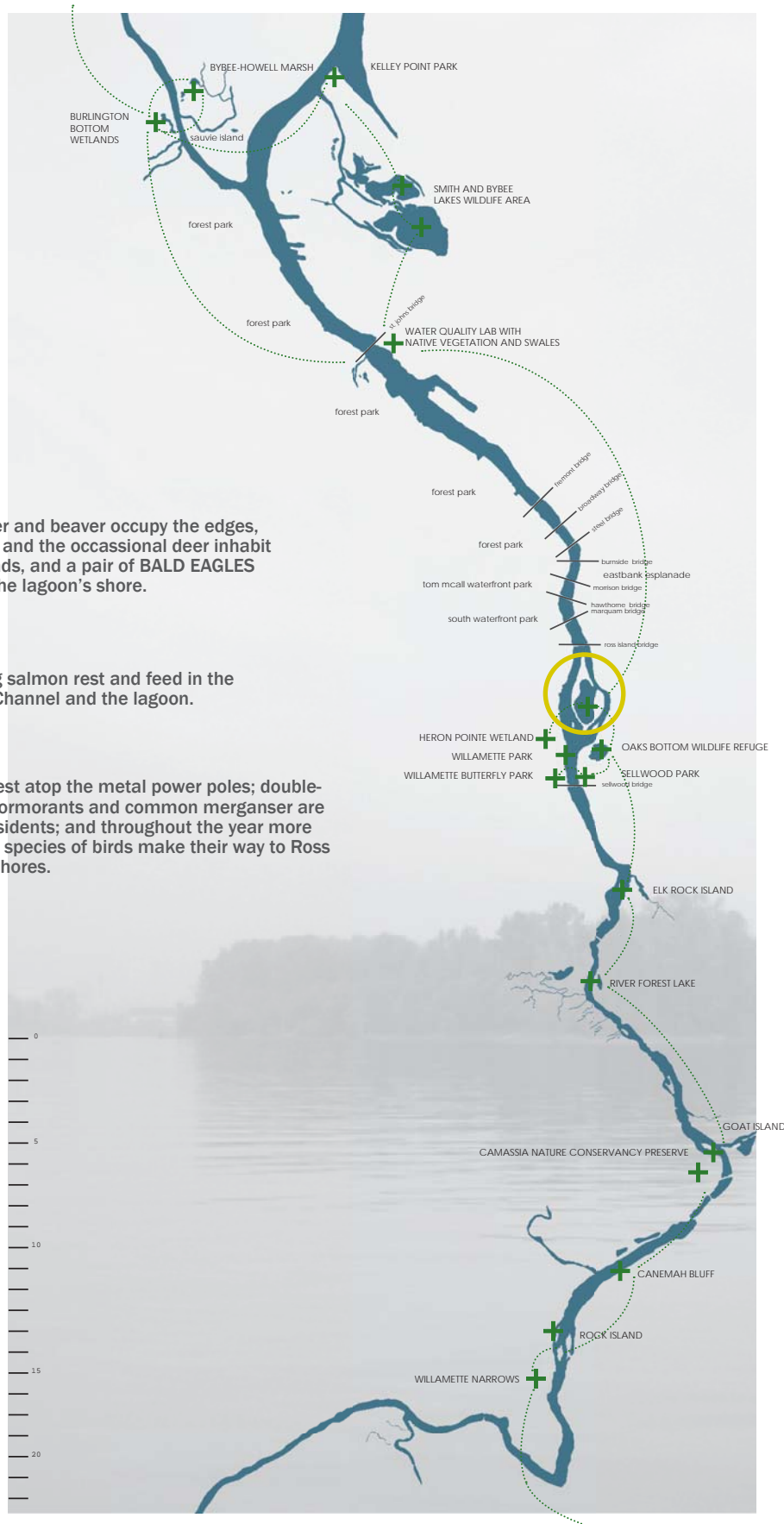
In her book *The Granite Garden*, Anne Spirn argues for a new way of thinking that treats the city, the suburbs, and wild areas as a single, EVOLVING SYSTEM within nature, and every park and building as a piece within this larger whole.

Labels on the map include:

- hosford-abernethy neighborhood
- south waterfront neighborhood
- the lagoon
- the settling ponds
- heron pointe wetlands
- willamette park
- south portland neighborhood
- butterfly park
- ROSS ISLAND
- HARDTACK ISLAND
- TOE ISLAND
- EAST ISLAND
- ladd's addition
- ross island bridge
- brooklyn neighborhood
- the processing plant
- the boneyard
- sellwood-moreland neighborhood
- oaks bottom wildlife refuge
- sellwood bridge

Ross Island is integrally connected to the landscape around it – the city, the neighborhoods, the parks, and the natural areas – and we must **CONSIDER THE ISLANDS IN THIS CONTEXT.**

habitat connectivity



River otter and beaver occupy the edges, raccoons and the occasional deer inhabit the uplands, and a pair of BALD EAGLES lives on the lagoon's shore.

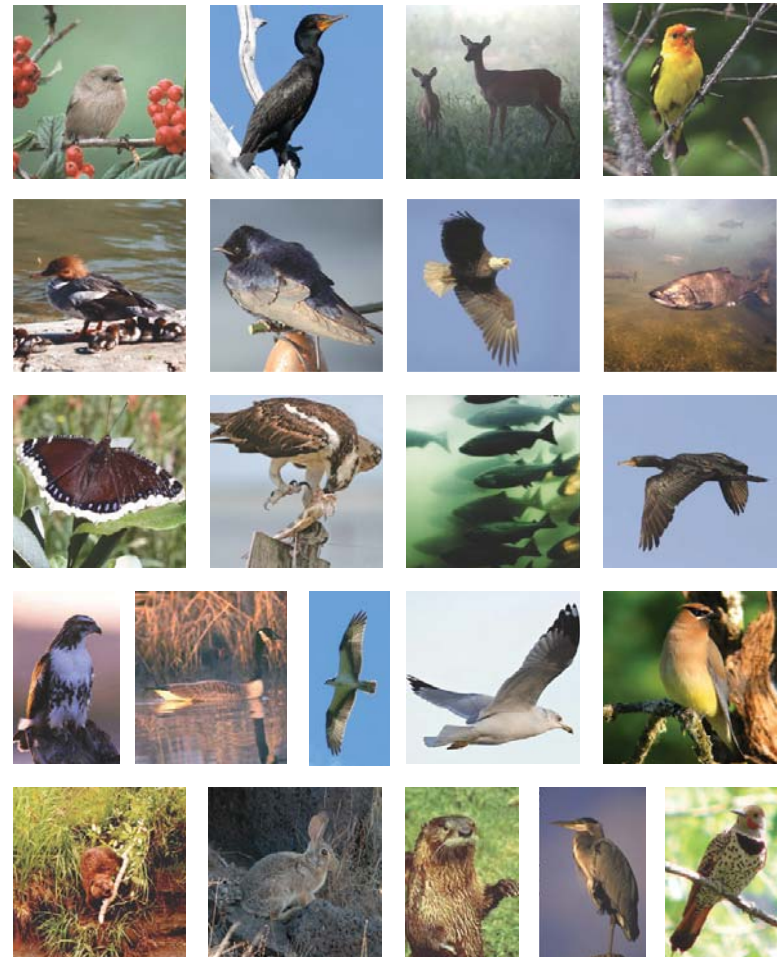
Migrating salmon rest and feed in the Holgate Channel and the lagoon.

Osprey nest atop the metal power poles; double-crested cormorants and common merganser are winter residents; and throughout the year more than 100 species of birds make their way to Ross Island's shores.

Despite over 75 years of constant mining and a boneyard of discarded parts, THIS ISLAND TEEMS WITH WILDLIFE.

But in order for these animals to thrive, they must be able to safely travel along migration routes and between shelters, food sources, and nesting sites. This makes the islands a vital **ECOLOGICAL STEPPING STONE** in a connected chain of habitats along the Willamette River, and improving or degrading any one of these habitat 'hot spots' has repercussions far beyond the boundaries of that place.

The Ross Island complex becomes even more critical to migrating fish and wildlife when we realize that Portland's urban waterfront areas have **HARDENED EDGES**, ones that are suitable for commerce but not for habitat. This means that every inch of Ross Island's 6.5-mile long shoreline matters. A lot.

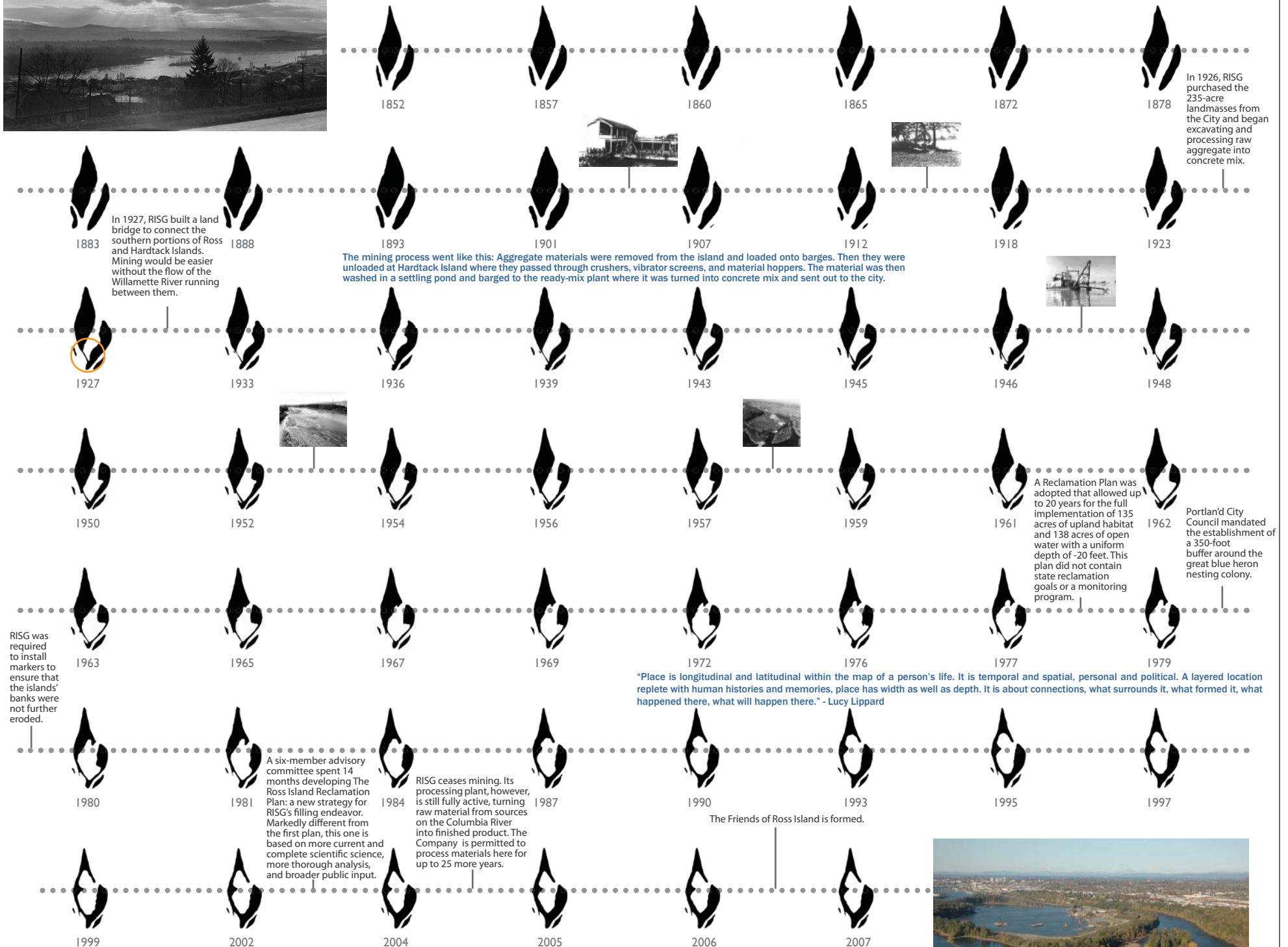


Ross Island is full of stories to tell. In fact, this site is a full-blown commemoration of multiple histories.

Once surrounded by a braided watercourse loaded with sand and gravel brought down from the Cascade Mountains, Ross Island has seen its river get straightened and its uplands get flooded. It has served as a homestead to Sherry Ross, the site of Blue Ruin's whiskey distillery, and a destination for picnickers and frolicking school children. It has housed a dance hall, a public bath, and a string of restaurants and saloons. There was even a bloody murder on its riverbank, and all of this before it was converted into a sand and gravel mine and later valued as an urban wildlife refuge.



"The land we inhabit is an accumulation of past events." - Aaron Betsky




Each landscape has story upon story laid over and running through it; every place has a narrative tale. These memories are what give a site the power of place. And to better understand our place in the physical world, each one of them is worth telling.



* In addition to constructing nearly half of Portland's buildings, the concrete produced from Ross Island's raw material was used to build the city's sidewalks, bridges, highways, driveways, and homes.

This means that for 75 years, Ross Island has been dug out, carved away, stripped, and DISASSEMBLED in order to build the city. But now that the Big Pipe Project is underway, it is city's turn to build the island. Producing, distributing, and receiving, these two are engaged in a rhythm of exchange: a relationship where raw material is shuffled around and cultural values are shifted.

What once came out is now going in. What was once sacrificed is now treasured. What was once taken apart is now RE-ASSEMBLED.

Now that Ross Island Sand and Gravel has ceased mining, *  the company is

bound by a Reclamation Plan to restore large portions of the excavated lagoon and uplands for opti-

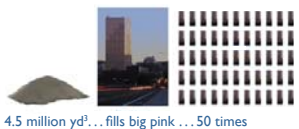
mum habitat. In order to comply with this new agreement,  the company must complete all

restoration efforts by 2013.  Because the lagoon is more than 130 acres in size

(and as deep as 125 feet) it will take ten years and approximately 4.5 million cubic yards of clean fill

to create the 118 acres of upland forest, 22 acres of riparian wetlands, and 14 acres of shallow water

habitat that is required. This is enough material to fill Big Pink, Portland's largest skyscraper, 50 times!



4.5 million yd³... fills big pink ... 50 times

Even after this restoration is complete, the islands still face many challenges,

such as pressures from recreational activities, 

Willamette River contamination issues,

 nearby development pressures,

 and other ongoing habitat degradation.

In addition, although the Ross Island Sand and Gravel Company donated 45 of Ross Island's acres to

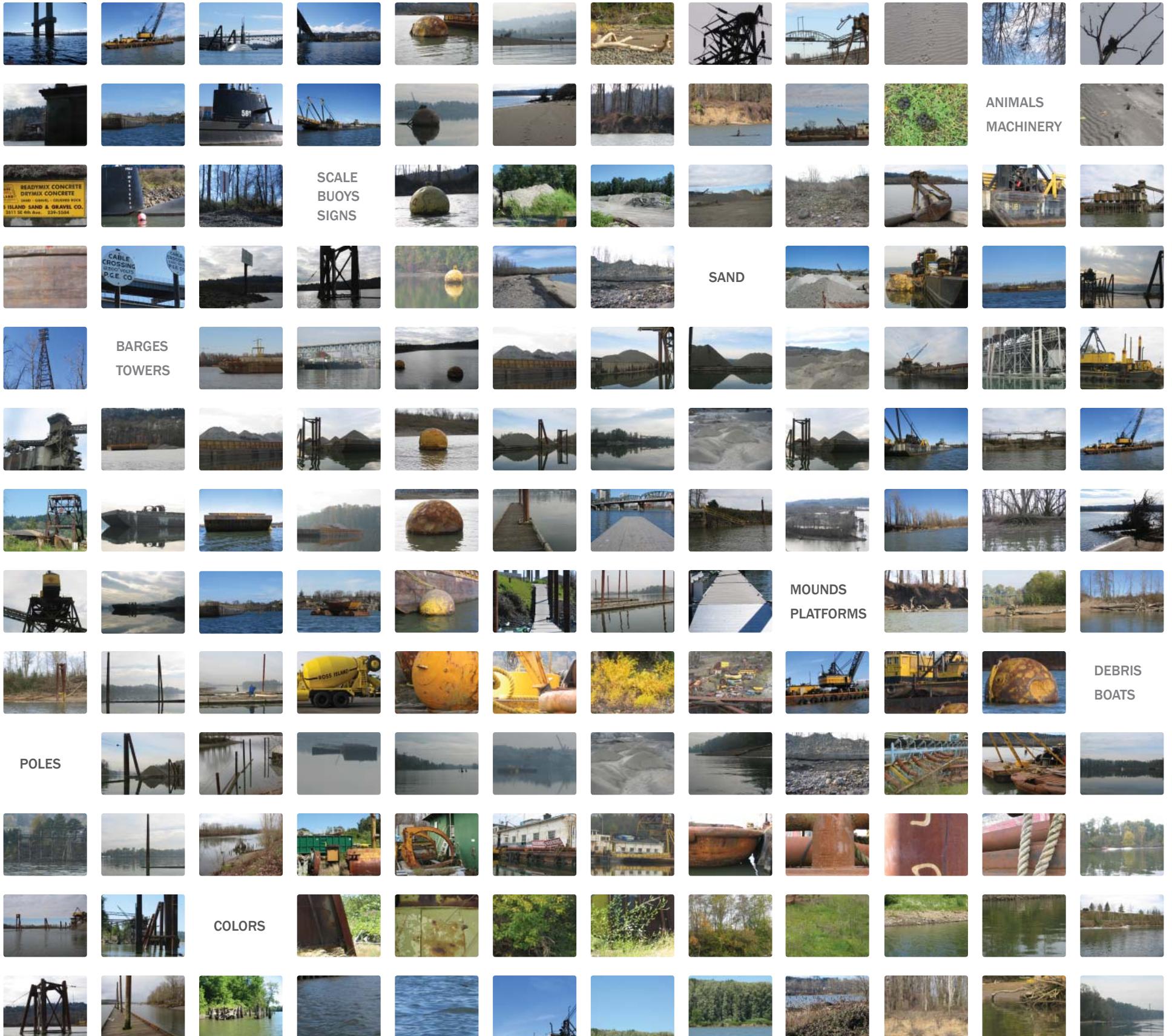
the City in the fall of 2007, what happens to the rest of the islands remains uncertain. And as it stands,

the future of these valuable islands hangs in the balance. 



- The Reclamation Plan is designed to accomplish the following goals:
- + establish riparian floodplain conditions along the interior lagoon shoreline
 - + establish an emergent wetland for a wide range of fish and wildlife
 - + provide for diverse aquatic conditions, including a range of lagoon depths
 - + plant and maintain native plant species in upland areas
 - + provide continued protection for the heron rookery and bald eagle nests

Landscape has all the features of language. It contains the equivalent of words and parts of speech – patterns of shape, structure, material, formation, and function. All landscapes are combinations of these. Like the meanings of words, the meanings of landscape elements are only potential until CONTEXT SHAPES THEM. Landscape is scene of life, cultivated construction, carrier of meaning. It is language. – Anne Spirn



The following principles were developed by the Ross Island Vision Team, and we believe that they should guide all future Ross Island restoration, management, and public access decisions:

- 1 First and foremost, restore and manage Ross, Hardtack, East, and Toe Islands to ensure their long term ecological functions.
- 2 Consider the islands in their context: as part of a watershed, part of a wildlife system, and part of a city.
- 3 Nurture a mutually beneficial relationship between humans and the islands that improves ecological values and encourages sensitive interactions.
- 4 Cultivate a stewardship ethic that builds public, private, and community partnerships to support the islands' restoration and ecological health.
- 5 Preserve, reveal, and interpret the islands' natural, cultural, and industrial histories.
- 6 Evoke the island's unique qualities and iconic nature.
- 7 Employ an artistic approach to the islands' restoration and management.
- 8 Establish a long term, phased adaptive management plan for the islands.
- 9 Respect the fact that East, Hardtack, and a portion of Ross Island are in private ownership.



painting of ross island by brian borello, 2003. oil on paper 8" x 11". image courtesy of pulliam-deffenbaugh gallery, portland.

HOW: A PHASED APPROACH

Ross Island is simply too big, its industrial activities too complex, and its reclamation goals too important to be treated with a single intervention at a single time. Rather, the islands require a temporal approach: a sequential method that responds to the Reclamation Plan schedule, the existing and future needs of fish and wildlife species, and the ongoing industrial processing. These phases should be structured by the site's circumstances, and should inform the island's transition from an active processing plant and reclamation site to a new, post-industrial urban landscape.

This approach for establishing healthy, protected animal habitat and inspirational, educational human experiences will help transform the islands into a very urban, very ecological wildlife refuge.

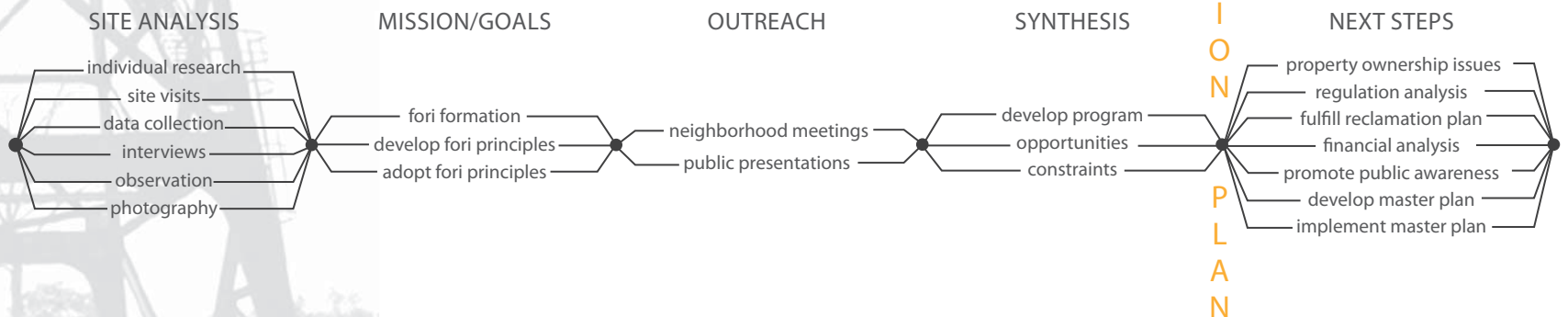
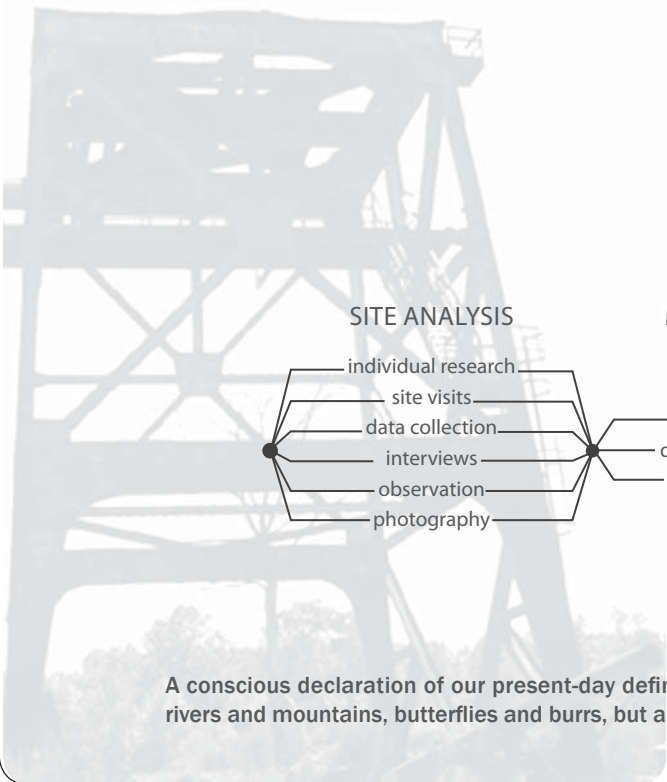
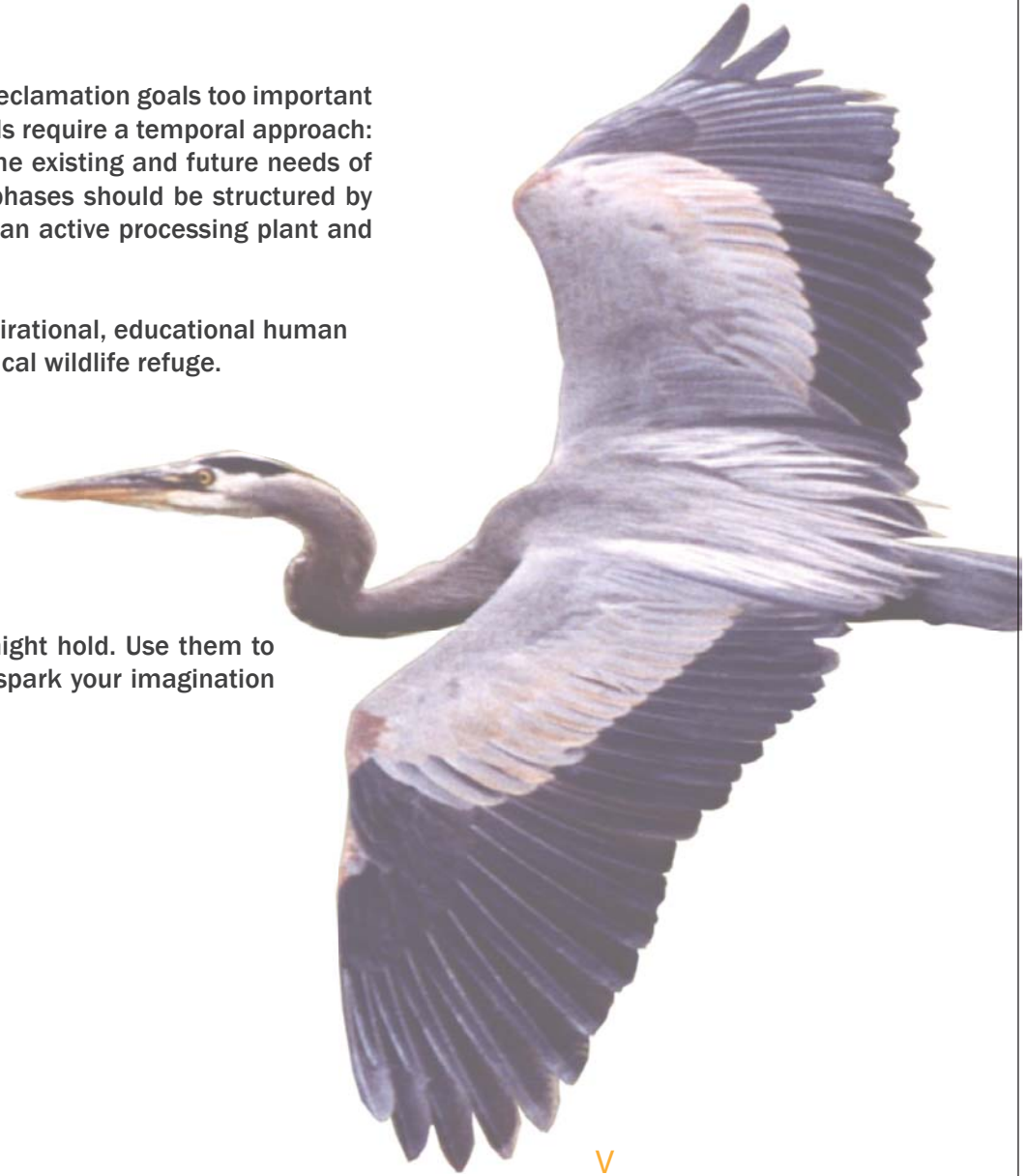
WHERE: PLACES TO EXPERIENCE ROSS ISLAND

- + the surrounding city
- + the surrounding water
- + the islands themselves

WHAT: A PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

The following images represent a vision for what Ross Island's future might hold. Use them to look beyond the practical constraints of Ross Island 2007. Use them to spark your imagination for what Ross Island could be in 10, 50, or even 100 years.

- + continued restoration
- + program
- + public art
- + landings
- + markers
- + viewpoints
- + adaptive reuse



A conscious declaration of our present-day definition of nature, a nature which, unlike that of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries includes not only plants and rocks, rivers and mountains, butterflies and burrs, but also humankind, may permit A DESIGN THAT MAKES LIFE POSSIBLE FOR THE WHOLE RANGE OF LIFE FORMS. – Diana Balmori

continued restoration

Even after Ross Island's Reclamation Plan is fulfilled, ongoing restoration will be needed to protect and enhance the islands' valuable habitat.

- + remove invasive species such as ivy and blackberry
- + improve habitat for terrestrial species
- + create nesting boxes for targeted species like wood ducks, purple martins and kestrels
- + remove trash and debris from habitat areas
- + direct human activity away from sensitive ecological areas and important nesting areas
- + control bank erosion
- + perform species diversity monitoring



As important as what happens to the physical land of Ross Island is what happens to the people who experience it.

There are already a number of events that exist on this portion of the river, but the HAPPENINGS imagined in this vision plan are of a different sort. Although there may certainly be occasions when volunteers can pull weeds; people can come to paddle, stargaze, and bird watch; and students come to learn, this plan also encourages people to **MAKE OFFERINGS**: to toss seeds, plant trees, or build cairns. By choosing from a range of raw materials and engaging in a programmatic offering-of-the-day, people can express their feelings of respect and care.

By participating in the restoration of the islands, by celebrating its seasons and cycles and by learning its history and marking the passage of time, we will connect to this place in a deeper, more lasting way. In essence, **WE HEAL AS THE ISLANDS ARE HEALED**. And as we begin to change our relationship with the land, our community's relationship to the land shifts as well. Best of all, this culture of stewardship gets passed on to future generations.

- + plant a willow stake along the wetland cove
- + build a cairn in the mound field
- + toss native plant seeds
- + mark what you saw on the habitat sighting board
- + measure your arm's length against a bird's wingspan
- + go on the visitor's center floating tour
- + ross island paddle trips
- + river walks along the springwater trail

- + spring bird walks
- + a midsummer night's paddle
- + the annual salmon festival
- + willamette river ferry service
- + 'splash day' clean-up events along the willamette river
- + volunteer 'ivy pull' days
- + 'seed the future' native species planting parties
- + 'headwaters to ocean' floating classroom trip

- + the portland paddle
- + the annual portland swim challenge
- + the annual providence bridge pedal
- + the annual great blue heron week events
- + the annual wild in the city outings
- + the procession of the species
- + the dragon boat races
- + kinetic sculpture events



Thousands of Portlanders enjoy the river both in and around Ross Island, and with ongoing development at the South Waterfront, many more are on their way.

Some folks feel that the island should be entirely off limits to humans, that it should be a place for wildlife and wildlife alone. Others think that intimately experiencing a place encourages us to protect it more carefully. This issue of access is still open for discussion. Should there be access at all? And if there should, how? Where? When?

When considering access to the island, the real question becomes: **CAN WE LOVE ROSS ISLAND WITHOUT LOVING IT TO DEATH?**

Can an old barge find new life as a visitor's center, docked at the island and filled with information for paddlers?

Can it help people experience what it feels like to be in a nest?



FLOATING DOCKS are barges or piers that are arranged in the lagoon. Can they be employed as viewing platforms, picnic spots, plant production docks, or floating bird blinds?



markers

Marking is a strategy that can highlight and recall the islands' various features. It can help secure sensitive animal habitats, designate human access points, and relay stories. It can delineate the island's changing edge, can tell us where material is going to and coming from, and can even let others know where we've been.

MARK v. to fix or trace out the bounds or limits of; to set apart by a line or boundary



viewpoints

Ross Island can be enjoyed from a number of different places in and around Portland, and if we are to avoid the impacts from overuse and *loving it to death*, we must take advantage of these less direct ways of experiencing it.



If you climb up the tower that overlooks the boneyard, you get a 360 degree, panoramic view of the entire Ross Island site.

the boneyard

the settling pond

the lagoon

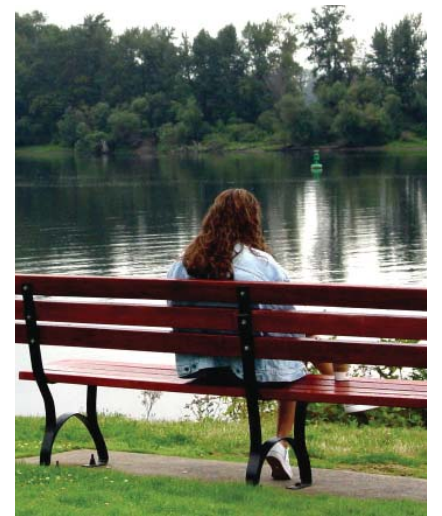
the processing plant

the sand stockpile

deciduous woodland

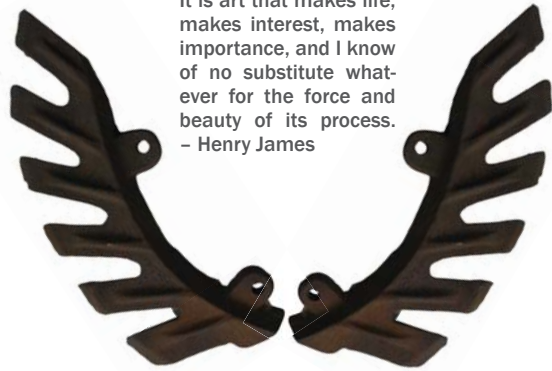


'getting a new perspective': can existing structures can be used to see the island from a bird's eye view?



Art in the landscape can communicate information in ways that a sign or a book cannot. It can give us new perspectives and allow us to experience our environment as we never have before. And it can touch our subconscious with beauty, connecting us with the natural world in profound and lasting ways.

eco-revelatory design n. design with the intent of revealing and interpreting ecological phenomena, processes and relationships



It is art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance, and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process.
- Henry James

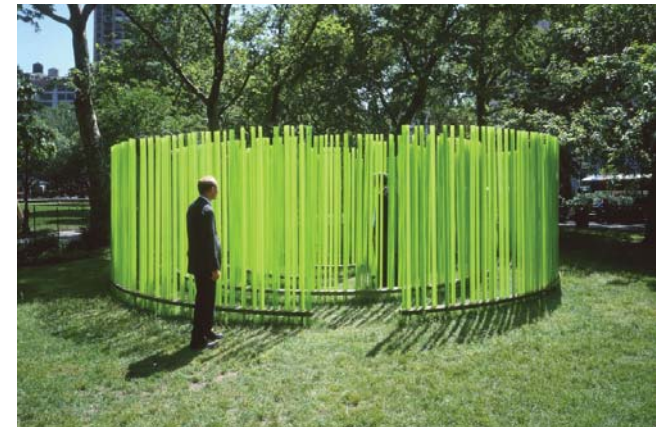
artistic interventions can be on the shore, in the water, or on the islands themselves, can be big and bold, fleeting and



momentary, humble and subtle, can provide habitat for endemic and migratory species, reveal natural processes, illustrate natural history and information about species inhabiting the island, can



tell the story of the islands' cultural history and remind us of how our city was built, can create a buffer or barrier between people and animals, and can celebrate the seasons and the natural world



adaptive reuse

Michael Boland defines adaptive reuse as “a process that changes a disused or ineffective item into a new item that can be used for a different purpose.” Catherine Howett says it is a form of **RECYCLING OR RECONFIGURING** that allows a manufactured site’s “abstract structures to remain and function in new ways.” In either case, on Ross Island this adaptation is already in full swing.

The island is a complex landscape where industrial activities and wildlife habitats **OVERLAP AND INTERTWINE**: osprey live atop the historic power poles; a family of swallows built their nests in the eaves of an abandoned dredge; wintering waterfowl use the rusted barges as a place to perch; and throughout the boneyard, vegetation sprouts from voids in the corroded machinery.

For a place like this, adaptive reuse is an embedded pattern, an already existing language. It reveals the interplay between what once was and what could be, and by acknowledging – and even highlighting – this dynamic, we can **HONOR HISTORY** while supporting a vibrant ecology.



can mining relics be transformed into art pieces, viewing towers, and suitable scaffoldings for animal habitat and vegetation?



We envision the Ross Island complex as **A NEW KIND OF URBAN WILDLIFE REFUGE**: one that hybridizes active industry and dynamic wildlife habitat. One that honors its cultural history and is structured by its pre-existing patterns and materials. One that invites people to participate in its processes, and highlights the exchanges that have long defined its character. One that even goes so far as to heal its altered landscape without erasing the trace of what altered it.

If designed thoughtfully, with bold gestures and fresh ideas, Ross Island can truly be a contemporary, urban ecological park that weaves truth, healing, and discovery into **A FERTILE AND MEANINGFUL PLACE**.

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