

Interview with Raj Kottamasu (R)
Interviewed by Katie Fortunato (K)
DSNY-Freshkills Oral History Project
April 3 2012 in Brooklyn, NY

[0:00:00]

K: Alright, so to start, can you just tell me a little bit about where you grew up?

R: Sure, I grew up in suburban Detroit. So I grew up in Southfield and West Bloomfield, which are both suburbs of Detroit.

K: Okay, and do you have any siblings?

R: I have an older sister.

K: And what do they do?

R: She is a pediatrician, and she lives in Michigan.

K: Oh, okay. And what did you want to be when you grew up?

R: I think for a long time I wanted to be a doctor, because I just figured that's what my parents did, and that's what a lot of their friends did. So I figured that's what I should want to do. But I also wanted to be a writer, and I wanted to be a filmmaker, and eventually I decided that I wasn't interested in being a doctor -- mostly when I was a teenager, because everybody else's parents and kids were doctors, and so I wanted to be different. So at that point I don't know what I thought I was going to be.

K: And what did your parents feel when you decided that you didn't want to be a doctor?

R: Oh, well I don't know if I decided it concretely until I was in my twenties. But my dad would still support me going to medical school. He's offered to pay for medical school.

K: Even now?

R: Yeah. Yeah, I mean... I appreciate that, medicine is a valuable profession and you make good money and you feel -- you don't question your worth to other people, and ...

K: True.

R: ...yeah, that's just -- there's a lot of security in many ways.

K: Yeah. So, do you have any memories of the parks where you grew up?

R: We didn't use a lot of parks. I mean, there are a number of parks in Michigan. In suburban Detroit there are fewer than in the rest of the state, because it's more rural than the rest of the state. But everybody had a huge backyard where I grew up, and so I don't think that there was in our community, there wasn't a great sense of civic membership because my parents' friends were all immigrants. So I think we used – I mean, I went to the park for – there were a couple of larger events in the park, that were from groups that we belonged to. They would have picnics or something in the park. And that's most of what I remember, and those parks were not that exciting. They were just big, open green spaces, not a lot of trees. Trees were around the perimeter, and a couple of trees were around the inside, but pretty flat, because Michigan is pretty flat. [They were] not that interesting to my memory. So those weren't formative experiences.

Actually, the time when I – I mean, I didn't get to spend a ton of time in public parks until I moved to Boston, and then I spent some more time in public parks. But then I was in school also, so things were a little bit busy. And then when I spent a summer – I'm trying to think, were there times before that? I spent some time in public parks in Chicago. I lived in Chicago for a year, and then when I moved to New York for the summer, I got to spend a lot more time in Prospect Park because I lived nearby, and that was really, really enchanting to me. I got to see so many people using the park in so many different ways at the same time on just like a regular weeknight, and it really inspired me in terms of having a space that's a commons that people of all stripes use.

K: So is it more the fact that you had more proximity to the park once you moved to New York, or just that you had more free time since you weren't in school?

R: Probably both, yeah. And then also I think the big draw for me at those parks was that they were public spaces: because I spent so much time when I was growing up in my house or other people's houses, I didn't have a lot of opportunities to intermingle with people that were strange to me.

K: Right [laughs].

R: You know, so that's one of the reasons that I really like living in cities, is that you do get to mix with all of these different types of people...

K: Yeah.

R: ...and that's one of the things that I think parks and other sorts of public spaces where people congregate are really special in cities because they are these places of unfamiliar interaction.

K: Would you say that you noticed a difference in the New York City parks that you've been to, as opposed to parks in Chicago or in Boston?

R: Yeah...

K:...like in the way the public utilized them?

R: Sure, I mean I think probably there are a lot of parks in Boston that are used in the same way as parks in New York. I think the sort of number of people who are using parks in -at any given time- in Boston is probably on average smaller. Not probably, *is* on average smaller. And that's just because Boston is a smaller place, but in Chicago a lot of the parks that I went to were more like tourist -- toured sort of destination parks, like Grant Parks and Millennium Park, and down in Hyde Park, there's all the former world fairgrounds -- I don't know what that park is all called. But yeah, I think there were just more people. There's a critical mass of people in New York using any given park.

K: And what did you do to school for?

R: For graduate school?

K: For undergrad.

R: For undergrad I studied psychology, and I did a bunch of coursework in the art department also.

K: And that was at Harvard?

R: Yeah, at Harvard.

K: And then you went to graduate school for urban planning?

R: Yeah, urban planning.

K: So how long -- was there a gap between your undergrad and your graduate work?

R: Yeah, there were a couple of years. I graduated from college in 2003, and I started grad school in 2005.

K: And what did you do between...?

R: I spent a year... actually I spent a year in art school in Chicago. That's when I lived in Chicago. And then otherwise I was -- I had jobs teaching and tutoring. I was doing SAT tutoring and I was teaching at this arts program in suburban Boston, teaching animation and video production, and then I also spent six months in Sweden working on an animated project there.

K: And so what made you decide to go back to school?

R: I was lonely in my art practice. It felt solitary and I was very -- I felt very uncertain about its value to other people. And it also just felt like I needed to be doing something that engaged me more with other people on a daily basis. And then also something that I didn't question the value of quite so much. So that's one thing, and then also I had been doing a lot of writing - and even the films that I was making - were sort of about places and the way that, that characters are shaped by their environments. And I had lived in a bunch of places, in different sorts of

communities, that were affirming to me in ways that I hadn't been familiar with when I was growing up. There was a sense of belonging, or a role that I was able to get there, and that made me feel more invested in that place, so I was interested in how that happens for people: how citizenship builds and then what sorts of measures are taken – can be taken – to enhance peoples' feeling of belonging in a place. And so all of that...I took an architecture studio one summer when I was in college, and so I was sort of familiar with design skills. And I actually took a history of urban planning course also in college, to fulfill a requirement and I'd enjoyed that class. So, all of that stuff together was enough to make me think that urban planning was a good sort of match.

K: What kind of job were you envisioning getting? I mean, what was your end-goal after you finished school?

R: It's really unclear to me. I mean, I think what I wanted was to be doing things that were creative in the service of a public. And I didn't know what those were going in, necessarily. I was hoping that grad school would help me identify some of those opportunities. And it did, it did for sure. But I think I was hoping that there was some way to use artistic skills in the service of the public sector. I don't know, in storytelling capacities, or in -- I'm not sure exactly what way I thought that that would be applicable. But I knew that it was still part of a narrative sequence for me. I could see that education and its connections to things that I'd done previously, and I just wanted to be a responsible adult, and I was hoping that the program would help me become that.

K: I think that's why we all go to grad school [laughs].

R: Yeah.

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K: So what kind of classes do you take to fulfill that major? I mean, I know nothing about...

R: Urban planning?

K: ...Urban planning.

R: So there are some requirements. I actually met a lot of the requirements from college, or I tested out of a lot of requirements. But there's a fundamentals of urban planning course that everybody takes. Sort of the introduction to establish you and serve the basic theory and literature; and even just the basic skills of making presentations, arguing for a particular project or against a particular project, considering who your constituents are, different models of what urban planners are, different sorts of hierarchical or non-hierarchical positions that planners have taken over time, different relationships to the public, to politics, to larger participation of the populace, or smaller. So that was one that was the introductory course, and then there's economics and statistics, and digital media skills. I didn't end up taking those because I tested out of those, but then I took a couple of studios that focused on particular projects in specific

cities, that were design studios making physical recommendations to clients that we had in those cities, who were just interested in the dialogue.

So that's sort of working more in the design realm, with architects, and in that case I got to be creative and make proposals that were not quite architectural, but more conceptual, like conceptual pieces that suited the place and were about place-making, and public art-type things. And so I started to see a role for myself in that, and I got – I found – this niche in the ability to tell the story to make the pitch, which is always a part of a planner's practice also, is presenting to the public and telling the story of the change, or integrating the public's experience into a future narrative of what the change could be for this place. And so I figured that I was good at that: I mean, that's sort of the role that I ended up assuming a lot of the times, as the storyteller, either with visuals or with writing or both, or some combination of things.

I took a class on housing, on vacant and abandoned property, acquisition and disposition, on how to streamline that in the city system so that you ended up with fewer abandoned properties that were sitting on the city's ledger – trying to make it faster for those properties to move off. And I took a course in the art department in the center for advanced visual studies, on public art. It was a public art seminar, and so I did do sort of public art: a phone-in storytelling project, through that class. Or not really through that class, but as part of the project I'd started in that class. I mean, there was basic introduction to urban design, urban design politics, things like that. Oh, I had to take some real estate courses, real estate finance.

K: So it sounds like it was a good mix of theory and practicalities, but then also the artistic side.

R: Right, it's a professional degree, so a lot of people go in having had some work experience in the planning field, and then wanting to get the additional boosts [so] they could then get some other rank of job, or some more responsibility, or higher wage, or something like that. So I value it for that, in that it gave me professional skills, but then I also valued that it also allowed me to look around intellectually, because of the type of institution that MIT is. They're really interested in knowledge, and a lot of people who do master's degrees then do consider going on an doing PhDs, so they're open to taking the professional degree as a launch pad for more intellectual investigation also.

K: So what was your thesis on?

R: My thesis was on the use of mobile device applications-- location-based mobile device applications that allow for what I was calling 'spatial annotation.' So it's telling stories about particular places, or uploading media about particular [places], that are located in particular places for other people then to download and consume on-site. So if I were digitally tagging this building, I would say "I lived here from this time to this time. During that time, this crazy thing happened, I saw the biggest dog I ever saw in my life, I was mugged by this person, I met this very important group of people and am now friends with forever" – that sort of thing. And I upload that and somebody who's walking by or who's checking it out is able to then use their mobile device to then download that information. So I was writing about a couple of – I did a survey of a couple of these particular types of projects that had existed at that point – this is 2006—and analyzed the content of the host of their annotations for particular neighborhoods,

and tried to identify what the particular value was of that medium as compared to a host of other types of annotation, whether digital or physical, and then tried to make some suggestions or some conclusions about what the value of that type of practice is for --or could be for-- community development, or even as raw data for urban designers to understand what a public values about particular places.

K: It sounds like you're really interested in storytelling in the urban space.

R: Yeah, for sure.

K: So, did you move to New York before you took the job with the Parks Department, or...which came first?

R: I moved -- I had spent a summer in New York in the middle of grad school, and I really enjoyed it. And so I knew that I wanted to move to New York after grad school, and I guess I moved here in October of 2007, and I was told that I got the job in late October 2007. This is pre-financial crisis, so things happened relatively quickly. But then I didn't start the job until January, just because it takes a long time for the city to process paperwork for a new hire.

K: So when did you apply to the job?

R: August.

K: Okay, and then you got hired in October.

R: I got interviewed in October, and then I got hired -- I got told that I got the job about a week later, but...

K: ...But then you didn't actually start till January...

R: ...didn't start till January of 2008.

K: So did you have to take the civil service exam?

R: You didn't have to take the civil service exam to -- I didn't have to take the civil service exam to have that job. I have taken the civil service exam since then, but essentially what I understand that that means for me is that I have sort of a guaranteed level of wage if I were to re-enter the city's workforce, on a permanent basis anyway.

K: And then how had you heard about the job?

R: It was on a jobs board, an MIT jobs board. Two of the people who were working on the Freshkills team at that point were MIT urban planning graduates, and so they had posted that listing on the jobs board at MIT also.

K: Were you applying to other jobs at that point?

R: Yeah, I applied to a ton of jobs at that point.

K: Did you get any other offers?

R: I was – before I left Boston, I was offered a job teaching animation at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, but I wanted to leave Boston and I also thought that it was important to see through the degree that I had just gotten, and get something more planning-related. So while I think that would have been a good opportunity, I think I would have wondered what would have happened if I hadn't taken it.

K: Was the degree a prerequisite to get the [Parks Department] job? Did you have to have it?

R: The Parks job? I don't think so. The way that the city lists – posts—jobs, it says, maybe it says graduate degree or equivalent, or equivalent experience, or three years experience, because lots of people have different routes to whatever their jobs are, and it doesn't necessarily involve graduate school. So I think that it's something about experience or graduate degree. But I think it helped.

K: Yeah. And so what was the application and interview process like?

R: The application was, you know, I sent a cover letter and my resume in, and maybe I sent a portfolio too at that point, I don't know if I did or not. Not that a portfolio is necessarily instrumental. And I don't imagine that a lot of people who applied to that job did send in a portfolio, because it wasn't a design job, it was a planning and programming job. And then it took awhile, and in October I got a phone call and they said, "would you like to come in and talk?" and so I did. And then I went and met them at the Freshkills office.

K: And what did you know about Freshkills before you applied for the job, if anything?

R: Not that much. I think I had heard the words "Fresh Kills." I'd never lived in New York really. I'd lived here only for that summer in between years of grad school, and I might have heard something about it. I mean, I was working in a planning-related office that summer. But I definitely didn't know anything about landfills, about the composition of landfills, how they're constructed, how they operate, and I wasn't really even aware of the presence – I wasn't aware of landfills in my surroundings that much. I think I knew about a couple of landfills in Boston, in Cambridge and Boston. But I didn't know that much about Freshkills.

K: So what was your exact title with the Parks Department?

R: My civil service title was community coordinator, but that is not – that doesn't always match up with the title you claim or describe yourself as, so my title that I was self-described as -or that our team identified me as- was arts programming and grants manager. So I was hired to seek grant funding and to manage new and existing grants for that project as well as to build an arts program, whatever that means. So it existed as something that you developed it with wide latitude. It was something that didn't exist, so essentially building an arts profile for this site.

K: So the arts part of it didn't exist before, but I'm sure in grant writing were you taking over that position from someone else, or had it kind of been dealt with by other people?

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R: Yeah, it had sort of been done. So the project, the Freshkills Park project started with the [New York City] Department of City Planning in the planning process, which actually started with the International Design Competition to conceive of a future for the site. So the Department of City Planning, with the support of the New York State Department of State, the Division of Coastal Resources, and in partnership with the Municipal Art Society, had held a design competition in 2001 to solicit designs for the park, and there were a lot of entries from all over the world, with primarily landscape architects involved in most of those entries. And then from that pool was selected this winning competition entry from James Corner Field Operations, which was then a small firm based in Philadelphia, and became a bigger firm with that and other projects – they're doing the High Line.

And so, the project then went through a master planning process from 2003 to 2005, which involved a lot of public stakeholder – public and stakeholder meetings, whether or not they were public meetings – so that was a lot of meetings on Staten Island and in Manhattan, and all that feedback on the winning competition entry was then integrated into the concept and then the city - Department of City Planning, in conjunction with Field Operations – then developed this master plan for the site that was released in March of 2006. And that's when the project was finally turned over to the Parks Department. So it started in I think '99, and so seven years with the Department of City Planning before it was turned over to the Parks Department. And during that seven years there was a lot of grant funding, again from the Department of State, and that grant funding continues into the present, into the recent present. I mean, just before I left my job in December, I think we were awarded another grant from the Department of State, so they've really seen the project through from the design competition through the planning process, and now into and through construction of the park.

K: Who else were you applying for grants from?

R: At that early stage, it was really the Department of State, the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation, congressional appropriations...I mean, it was essentially government agencies: the Federal Highway Administration, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. It was all federal and state agencies, mostly state agencies actually, fewer federal. Or it was federal money that was filtered through a state agency. And I think that's most of where our grant-seeking was up through last year. So last year the Freshkills Park Alliance was incorporated, and the Freshkills Park Alliance is the non-profit arm that is established to support the development of Freshkills Park, and specifically to focus on operations of the park, and programming and revenue generation. And that's pretty common: a large park in this city usually has a non-profit arm that does a lot more of that stuff. But it includes a lot of this private fundraising also, because while the city can receive private donations, it sort of has to do so through the City Parks Foundation and then there are limits in the ways that that money can be spent, and it so it allows for greater flexibility for the non-profit entity to do that fundraising. So

last year we started doing that fundraising, and I think over the last year, and including time since I have left the Parks Department, the agency has gotten quite a bit of support – or not the agency, but the Freshkills Park Alliance has gotten quite a bit of support from those private foundations toward programming and outreach, and other operations of the Freshkills Park Alliance.

K: So was this going on at all at the same time as the High Line development?

R: Mmm-hmm.

K: Because I was just thinking that that's been so publicized, and especially their non-profit, the Friends of the High Line – I feel like that's gotten so much publicity that I haven't seen Freshkills getting.

R: Yeah, sure. Yeah, the High Line also – that project – the Friends of the High Line incorporated in the 80's -- the late 80's, or the early 90s, or perhaps the mid '80s, I don't remember. Anyway, it's been at least fifteen to twenty years that they have been working toward the preservation of the High Line, and the development of the park. So they are at a different stage of the game, and also they have something that's open now, and...

K: ...and it's a lot smaller.

R: ...and it's a lot smaller. But it's also in Chelsea and has a ton of wealthy businesses that surround it, that benefit from it, that are then invested in its improvement and its publicity, because that enhances their real estate value and their business opportunities. And that whole west side has really only become such a thriving place over the last ten years, ten to fifteen years. So there's a lot more money that rides --and a lot more glamour that rides-- on the High Line's success. And also, there is this industrial chic of reusing a railroad yard or a rail trestle, because that's something that's very hip right now, is reusing industrial infrastructure as more everyday places. Lots of buildings are rehabbed and allow their beams to show, or you have lofts in old factory buildings and things like that. We haven't yet totally broached this taboo of reusing waste landscapes.

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There's some in this city, but it hasn't yet become a "cool" thing to reuse a waste landscape. It's become cool to use garbage, like in art or home furnishings, but somehow the spoiled landscape hasn't yet become the hip thing.

K: So in your job, can you give me a sketch of your day-to-day responsibilities? How much time was taken up by grant writing, and how much time was spent on the arts arm of it, and how much time was spent on outreach?

R: It really depended on what was the important thing at that time. I think the strategy that the team was taking while I was there was very much about moving forward particular projects to a point – to the furthest point that they could be moved forward, and then hoping that whatever

was an obstacle to their actual fruition would then resolve itself. But just sort of moving, advancing as many little chess pieces as possible, and then if some political moment happened where someone was ready to endorse or support one of them, it would be ready. There was this contemporaneous process of figuring out what our priorities were, like what did we need to push on for something to happen first, or were all of these things equal priorities. And so that was still a work in progress, at the time I was there.

But I would say I probably spent half of my time in the job doing grant writing and grants management. The grants management was probably a larger half than the grant writing, or a larger segment of that time. Probably sixty-five percent of that half was grants management and then the other thirty-five percent was grant writing. And in part that was also because there ended up being obstacles to even getting to the point where we could spend the money. If it was a capital expense, we had a lot of regulatory obstacles to getting the project even to construction. We weren't sure that we would be able to spend money if we sought it. And so that was a challenge.

Or if it was programming, we didn't know how we would staff up to be able to do that program. We didn't have yet the infrastructure, the organizational infrastructure to accept a large amount of programming money. Not that we sought out a large amount of programming money, but these were always the challenges of, you appeal for the big, sexy project, but you then also have to have the resources to execute it, or the capacity to execute it. And that was always the tension that big projects exist in, because it was at such an early stage, and the kinks hadn't yet been worked out of the process of the approvals processes, that we didn't know – we weren't certain of our ability to deliver on some of those proposals. So the ones that we were more certain about, which were about complimenting existing capital budget with more funding so that we could more robustly build out segments of the park that we already had slated, that's what I focused on largely. So that happened. There's a grant round for any of these state and federal grants every year, most usually unless there's a big financial crisis, in which case sometimes things get delayed, and the agency is well aware of them and sends out a notice at that point in the year and says, "this is coming up, the agency is going to submit x number of these, please make your proposals," and so we would do that. That would happen twice or three times a year, and that would be one or two applications each of those two or three times. There were more discreet projects, and at the same time I was always looking for other opportunities, and sometimes they would appear and sometimes they wouldn't.

And then the arts program stuff is the other half of that, and again because that didn't exist and there was a lot of latitude, it was a lot of figuring out what can we do, what are we capable of doing given our staff resources and our material resources, what are we also capable of doing in terms of the access that we can provide to the public, because we didn't have a location. We didn't have an off-site location, and our on-site location, which is the Freshkills Park site itself, is officially closed to the public. We offer public tours, but those are very constrained by the bus that we have to drive people onto the site with, and our staff resources on-site and what we could actually do to the landscape, all of these things...so it was a lot about threading the needle, figuring out what can we do here, when to do that, what's the scale of what we could do with that. Who's the partner we could do that with, or some different order of those things: who's the partner, what could we do with this partner, when could we do that with that partner, that sort of

thing. So it was a lot of figuring out how to get all of those pieces in order so that they all fit through this reasonably narrow hallway to getting something accomplished.

K: It sounds stressful.

R: I don't know if it was stressful, but it was challenging. And it can be frustrating also, because it's a new process for that site, it's a new whole program for that site. The Department of Sanitation wasn't necessarily comfortable with all of these ideas because they have a particular mandate to close and monitor and manage the landfill for a long period of time, still beyond the build-out of the initial project of the park, and they haven't been accustomed to thinking about this as a site where the public is involved or invited, or a site where other things that are not landfill are built. So those were the challenges in working with them, in working out what can we do that doesn't compromise your goals, but also achieves our goals.

And then there were regulatory challenges, because there's a lot of people who weigh in on what happens in that site, in particular the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, and they had particular ideas about what was and was not allowable on site, and constraints on how we could go about achieving some of our goals. There's also people like the borough politicians, the State Dept of Transportation, the Department of Buildings, the City Department of Transportation: there's a whole lot of players in that game, and you have to get approvals from a lot of them. It can be very frustrating, but I think that is what public works are. You're doing something on the public's behalf, with the public's money, so you're accountable to a lot of people.

K: And how many people were in your department, or working on this particular project with you?

R: There were six of us in total working on Freshkills eventually. So when I started, there were one, two, three, four, five – no, there were six when I started. And then there continued to be six pretty much throughout that time that I worked there. Everybody there – it was a Parks Department team, though there were at the outset two people --and when I left, one person-- who were officially City Planning employees, but who were on permanent loan to the Parks Department on this project, also to continue that transition of the project from City Planning to the Parks Department.

K: What was the learning curve for you when you started the job? I mean how much of this had you done before, and how much was completely new that you had to really figure out?

R: Most of all of that stuff that I just said was pretty new. I had done a lot of writing before, persuasive and non-persuasive writing, so the grant writing, while the parameters were somewhat unfamiliar, I feel like the general idea – I feel like I'm a capable writer, and I think I was able to pick up what that was. And I did look at some grant writing books, but that wasn't as hard to pick up. Having expertise on the site was the thing that was the biggest challenge, because you can have tons of great ideas, but it's such a specific site that that's the major thing that you have to learn on that project, is you have to learn the site and what it's capable of hosting, and what

it's not, and how to thread that needle. So I feel that I continued to learn about the site for all four years of working there.

I would say figuring out how to get to a place where I could get things done – programming-wise, especially – probably took a year and a half working at the job. Figuring out what was possible, what hadn't been tried, what had been suggested, and then also just building credibility enough with various collaborators. And even within my team, when I had an idea, I could advocate on behalf of that idea in a convincing and compelling way that also recognized all of these constraints and wasn't just sort of a naïve idea, like “we should do this!” but “I think we should do this, and here are the ways in which it would happen, here are the things I can imagine being challenges, here are the things we have to work out, here are some strategies for working that out.” It took at least about a year and a half, so that was discouraging for some time, because that was a longer period of time than I would expect. But I think it takes awhile to understand the site entirely.

K: Right. And to even understand the various agencies and players that are involved.

R: Sure, yeah. And I hadn't worked for the city before, and I didn't have the local context, so it did take quite awhile to just get up to speed.

K: What was the most enjoyable aspect of the job for you? I mean, what did you look forward to doing the most?

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R: Getting the public to be able to participate in programs is the most affirming part of that job, because it was what I was excited about. I was excited about – my goal was to be able to tell the story of this site through various means. Whether that was art or lecture series, or writing publications, things like that. Or even through grants, and publicity, and social media and things like that. Getting people engaged in the site, and its story and its various issues enough that they would want to be invested in the park – I think that was the goal of my job. When it could actually be realized, when people could be on site, or they could be at an event that's offsite, and experiencing something that they valued so that they could then become advocates for the park— I felt like I was actually being successful at my job.

So the best examples of that are the “sneak peak” events: the sneak peak was the park preview event that we started doing in 2010, and then we did it in 2011. And those are one day, five hour events to which the public at large is invited, where we opened up a section of the site for the day, with more unfettered access than at any other time of the year. And they got to engage in activities that were park-like, that previewed what you could be able to do at the park, whether it was flying kites, or last year we allowed people to bike around, but before that it was just walking tours, walking around. We had bands, and food, and crafts, and this past year we had a bunch of artist who installed at the site. We had kayaks, kayak tours – we had canoe tours the first year, and we had a bunch of kayaks the second year.

Using the park, and seeing its potential as a site, and being enchanted by it – that was the biggest validation. And that event was something that I had conceived. The deputy commissioner had said he wanted us to host a country fair – Freshkills country fair, and we thought some more about it and tried to merge, or to meld that into something that fit more with the identity that we were trying to build of the site being this sort of hub for sustainability, and this place that was really about its unusual landscape, and its unusual recreational opportunities. And I had thought about – there’s this park in California that’s being built over a long period of time as well: it’s the Orange County Great Park, and they built a little section of that park and called it a “preview park,” because it’s a much larger project otherwise, and so people were able to occupy a little piece of the park, and see the potential of the site. So I knew that we couldn’t do that necessarily so quickly, but thought why don’t we have a park preview event, where we could open up this section of the site, which we’ve done a bunch of programming on, which isn’t as actively used by the Department of Sanitation, and then we could sort of contain it and be able to allow people to be on site, because that would actually be a preview. And then it continued to evolve, that idea, over the course of planning for the 2010 event. And then we had it, and we didn’t know how many people would come out – we thought maybe 500, 800, and we had almost 2,000 people come out. And it was a very successful event, and we got a lot of really positive feedback. And that felt great, it felt really like a validation of a lot of good, hard work and planning. And then we did it again the second year, and it was just as successful, and we did more stuff the second year, and so it felt like “okay, we’re growing on this, we’re inching toward being able to have a park, and having people be excited about it.” So that was the most exciting part.

K: What was some of the feedback that you received from people that went out to the sneak peak events?

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R: That they had no idea that it was so beautiful. That there was – that they could see the promise of the site, that we were doing a real service to the people of Staten Island, that then had been burdened with this waste landscape for such a long time, and the additional stigma that that carries. I think predominantly it’s just that it was – it’s a beautiful site. And it is, it is very beautiful, and it’s very unusual in New York, and it’s so big. And that’s really the biggest selling point of the park, is getting people there so that they can see it, because it is a really rich site with a lot of rich potential.

K: What was – was it mostly Staten Islanders that came to that, or was it people that came from all over the city?

R: People came from all over the city, but it was still probably more than half Staten Islanders, I would say both years. The second year – the 2011-- we also had buses that were ferrying people from the Staten Island ferry terminal directly to the site all day. We also had water taxis that were departing from Battery Park and delivering people all the way to Freshkills, so it was over an hour’s trip or several trips during the day. We had had a water taxi earlier in the year in March, for the 10th anniversary of the closure. We had a small event for that, so we had water taxis come for that, but otherwise these were the first passenger boats to dock at Freshkills ever. We did a lot of work, especially that second year to get more people from other parts of the city

out. I don't know if it was necessarily super successful, we still had probably more Staten Islanders than anyone else, and that's great also because it's important for Staten Islanders to be excited about that project. They're the ones who live there. And they're the ones who are going to use it most often. There are challenges to getting people from the other parts of the city out there, and those are challenges that will continue to get worked out as the park actually evolves and starts to be a real place.

K: How did you advertise for the events?

R: We sent out packets of posters or postcards to – well the first year we just did it to schools and libraries and schools on Staten Island. The second year we did it we expanded that to schools and libraries off the island, not all of them, but quite a number of them. We did outreach through the Parks Department's press office, put out our press release and did reporter pitches. Advertised through social media, and then also because we had a lot of program partners, both times, especially the second time, we tried to have those program partners advertise for the event through their networks, that they were going to be at the event participating, doing whatever activity.

K: And then in between the two events that you guys put on, how did you continue to keep interest in the park, or get people out there?

R: Well we have the tour program that runs from April through November – and I keep saying 'we have' but I'm not a part of this team anymore – but the Parks Department runs public tours, bus tours, of the Freshkills Park site twice on Wednesdays, twice on Saturdays every week from April through November, and so that brings out a good sixteen hundred people a year. And then we expanded our offerings so that we could offer bi-monthly bird watching tours, which were also very popular. I put out an RFP – Request for Proposals – for artists and cultural producers to co-opt the tour, to do anything that they wanted to do along the tour route. So we had a couple people who responded to that and did: there was a musical performance, there was a composting workshop, there was a dance performance both in 2010 and 2011, that the dance performance sort of followed from a series of on-site investigations from the choreographer and her dancers and her collaborators. And then we had an off-site lecture series that I ran that was about topics that were sort of relevant to the topics touched on by Freshkills. Not necessarily about Freshkills, but about waste or landscape architecture, or sustainability, or New York City history, or all of these different topics that Freshkills touches on, but just hosted under the aegis of Freshkills as a learning opportunity, as a learning moment. So let's take this opportunity in this universe to learn some more. And so those were all ways to keep people engaged.

We participated in a public art project that Creative Time ran called Key to the City, where people had these keys that unlocked a series of locks throughout the city. So we had a box on our tour bus, this locked box that the key would open, and there was a huge pair of binoculars in there that you could use on-site. So we had a lot of people out through that program. We developed a couple of art projects with different artists or with arts agencies; one was we started working on a longer term project with Creative Time that hasn't yet come to fruition – there were obstacles to executing that. I worked with an artist – a Staten Islander named DB Lampman -- to develop, to site some sculptures that she'd gotten some grant funding for. First, I guess I

helped her to get the grant, or wrote a letter of support for her to get this grant to be able to install these sculptures at Freshkills, so she built the sculptures in conjunction with some site visits. And then we developed the protocol, the sort of approvals protocol with Department of Sanitation – all of the questions that needed to be answered, and all of the parameters that needed to be met in order for her to be able to install those on site and not compromising the landfill infrastructures. So we installed those sculptures, she did a performance with those sculptures, and so that was the first art installation at Freshkills. I built a partnership with the Land Art Generator Initiative, which is a design competition that's currently running up through July of 2012 for proposals for large-scale renewable energy-generating public artworks to be sited at Freshkills. This is an ideas competition, so it's not necessarily that any of these ideas would be executed and built at Freshkills --the award is a cash prize-- but the intention was to again stimulate public engagement and interest in the site, and consider its potential as a renewable energy-generating site, as a public art site, as a site that hybridizes these things, because it is a hybrid site. It's engineered, but it's also very natural. It's one of these new sorts of landscapes. So these were all ways to continue to keep the profile afloat, buoyant, so that people could keep engaging with it. And that was important – that continues to be important – as the park build out stretches over a long period of time. Because it's such a big site, it's so remote, it's important to keep it on people's radars so that it has public and political currency as a project.

K: So it sounds like you're really taking advantage of --or the Parks Department is taking advantage of-- the site's unique history in getting people interested and using that as a focus point. Do you think that its history as a landfill is more of a boon to the marketing of the park, or is it difficult to get people excited about garbage? Like you were saying about the High Line, [Freshkills is] not as sexy as revamping an old train line.

R: Right, that's a good question. I mean, there's a balance, right? For some people, the site is made more fascinating by the fact that it's a landfill, and for some people it totally closes the conversation. They would never go to visit a landfill. So it's a blessing and a curse. You get some people there for either reason, either that they're interested in it, or they want to forget, and they want to bulldoze even just with their footsteps the idea that this is a landfill. And say, 'let's forget that it was a landfill, it should just be a park, it's so beautiful.' But it's a public site, so you can't control the narrative. You can guide individual strands of the narrative, but you can't expect that any story would go away about Freshkills as a landfill, or any conception of it. You can work toward building people's greater understanding of the site, so if they have -- there is stigma that's attached to the site, that they attach to the site, you can temper it with more knowledge about how the site is managed and maintained. With what the regulations are that the Department of Sanitation holds itself to and is held to by state authorities, with data about decreasing contaminant levels over time to a point of negligibility. You can talk about the ecology and the health of the ecology, but we also built partnerships with research institutions to try to have more information about the recovery of different systems on site, the ecological recovery of different systems on site and what we can do to continue to boost that.

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All of those things are general concepts, and this is something that we developed once I joined the team, because we were actually doing more outreach programming, arts stuff. [It] was a

concept of how to tell the story of the site in an honest and transparent way, because people can see through opaqueness – that’s ironic, I suppose. In general when you are not transparent about a large process I think people can smell something. Again, not to be ironic because it’s a landfill. So basically we were trying to think about, how are we as transparent as possible about what we know about the site, and what the history, the accepted history is of the site, while still being optimistic. And there’s a lot there, but that seemed like the most honest and down-the-middle approach to take. Not to sort of pander to, or to sugarcoat things for people who were afraid of the landfill, but to try to educate them to raise their knowledge level up to the point where they felt comfortable, or where they might feel comfortable. And not to necessarily totally go the other way and totally intellectualize the project, because it also is a local -- it’s a park that people have to be able to use, and play in, and relax in, and not be burdened with thinking about all of the infrastructure all of the time. You have to be able to sort of toggle between these things. So yeah, it sort of depended. We focused on different aspects for different audiences. And I don’t think we lied or sugarcoated it really, but we definitely emphasized different things for different people, and I think that’s fair because different people want different things from a park.

K: So was there a difference in how you marketed it to Staten Islanders versus people in the outer boroughs, or people even outside of the city?

R: Well, I think I don’t know if I would paint with that broad of a brush. I think that there are different groups of Staten Islanders, there are different groups of people outside of the city. I think that in general the people who made the effort to come out to the site from other parts in the city were more interested in the site because of its history as a landfill. Because of whatever intellectual cache that has of hanging out at a former landfill, or because they’re New York City history buffs, or planning nerds, or they’re artists who found it interesting, or they’re scientists who found it also curious or interesting. And on Staten Island there are all of those same people, but there are also a lot of people that the thing that would identify them is just that they live nearby, and so they have to live with it. And so that’s a little bit different than traveling to go see something as a spectator. You actually have to be there and live with it every day. So I think in general we were conscious and sensitive to people’s concerns about landfill, or their sensitivity about the history of the landfill, and the stigma attached to Staten Island. And so maybe we didn’t – I think probably when I would give public presentations, I gave more that were about how fascinating the site was in all of its many aspects in venues that were off the island, because I think I also just had more opportunities to do that, to universities and things like that. And also that’s more of what people were interested in in those university settings or off-island settings. They were interested in it because it was an interesting place, not necessarily because it was a local place. So yeah, I suppose on Staten Island it’s very important to talk about what progress is being made, what progress will be made, what the future plans are, what the status is, what the budget is. It’s much more practically oriented as to when will this happen, when will it change. And off-island, maybe it was a more abstract or intellectual sort of discussion.

K: Did you ever come across any issues of mistrust on the part of Staten Islanders who might have felt that decisions have been made for Staten Island by various city agencies or city government [in the past], so in coming in, were they more open to you or were they a little mistrustful of, here’s somebody else coming in and telling us what this space is going to be?

R: You get a mix there. There are some people – there have been some people on Staten Island who are mistrustful of city government, especially government that isn't --or decisions that are made-- by a larger authority than island authorities, Staten Island authorities, because Staten Islanders have had a lot of city officials come in and make decisions for them, or they've felt excluded from decisions that affect them directly. So they're mistrustful of that. But then there are a lot of people who see that you're acting in good faith and see that you're trying to include people and appreciate it. They sometimes get out-voiced by that other group of people who want to be able to take things into their own hands, except the thing is that the master plan for the park did go through this public process, this two year public process to gather all of that input and to marshal behind this idea all of these resources, these financial resources that come from the city as a whole, not just from Staten Island. And also these professional resources that come, not just from Staten Island. So some people appreciate that, some people don't, and in part that's based on whatever their own individual history has been with government, with city government, and how they feel that they've been respected or not respected in that process. For our part we tried to be as responsive and as inclusive as the process permitted.

K: Have you heard feedback from Staten Islanders that are maybe a little bit older, or remember [Fresh Kills] from even before it was really used as a landfill, and are now seeing the third shift of that space? Was there reaction from them?

[1:04:13]

R: I think in general it's positive from those older Staten Islanders who saw the site before it was even a landfill. I don't think that their perspective or their opinion is that variant from the island as a whole. Some people are mistrustful, some people are excited, especially the people who had seen the site before it was a landfill, it was a place that people --- you know, Staten Island at that point, in the '30s, '40s, was a place that was much more rural, and people rode horses a lot, and went fishing and camping, and picked watermelons and things like that. And so I think that some of those people are excited to have that stuff back. To have that more country-like atmosphere, or the opportunities that that affords back, certainly more than having it be a huge garbage pile. Because I was not the outreach coordinator, I didn't have as much direct interaction with some of those folks, like the New Dorp AARP. I know they were a great group that we took out a number of times, and our outreach coordinator had more one-on-one interaction with them and heard more of their stories. But they were also very supportive of the project. So I suppose in that regard, yes, I think as a whole those people were excited that we were making a positive change on the island.

K: Can you talk a little bit about the name change from Fresh Kills – two words – to now it's going to be Freshkills Park? And it's funny, because in reading about [the park] or just Googling around various sites, you see that they're used interchangeably. There hasn't been a definitive shift yet to the new spelling of it.

R: And I don't know, there's nothing that was made official about that. That was essentially just a branding strategy that was recommended to the Parks Department by a consultant to soften the 'kills,' the word kills. While that does hark back to the original Dutch and it was determined to be important to retain the original name of the site for historical resonance and relevance,

because in English ‘fresh kills’ is a harsh term, or can be read as a harsh term and not as fresh water or fresh stream, it was recommended that we soften the word kills by adjoining it and making it lowercase in the word Freshkills Park. So along with a variety of branding and identity approaches that we adopted, we started writing Freshkills Park, and there were rules for that. So if you were talking about the site historically you would say Fresh Kills -- two words -- if you were talking about the Fresh Kills Landfill you would say again, two words, Fresh Kills. If you were saying about the region, before it was identified as a landfill in the first place, you would also say Fresh Kills, two words. You would never refer to Freshkills Park, to the park site, as Freshkills -- one word --- you would say Freshkills Park. Again, like Freshkills, one word, Park, a second word. So these were all rules that we established, and that was just stuff – we didn’t send out a press release about it, we didn’t lay out those rules for people, we just tried to let them infiltrate into usage.

K: What were some of the other branding things that you did?

R: A lot of the other branding stuff was about logo type, colors, templates for outreach publications, and that was all developed by the consultant – and then some catchphrases, or not catchphrases, but words that could be used in advertisements or in printed materials.

K: Can you give me some examples?

R: Yeah, there was this concept of “re,” like this is a “re-visitation” or a “re-” something. So there’s this prefix re and then the consultant gave us a whole list of words that could follow the re, like re-imagine, rediscover, reuse, recycle, those sorts of things that we could use on – which we ended up using on big mesh banners all over the site with renderings of the future park. So it was all graphic stuff.

K: Yeah, I think I’ve seen some of those big banners driving along. So there was an emphasis though on this kind of transformative aspect of the park...

R: For sure.

K: ... and I assume continues to be. So what are going to be, or what are some of the things that you have highlighted about the park, and what are going to be some of the big draws that the Parks Department will be highlighting, in terms of when the first stage finally opens? What’s going to gather the public there?

R: I think when the first stage opens, the first projects should actually open this year, within the next couple of months. Those are perimeter neighborhood projects, so those will be projects that serve local needs, and not necessarily city-wide needs. They’re about recreational opportunities: soccer fields and a playground. Both of those projects are designed in such a way to make them distinctive. The soccer fields have a “comfort station,” which is the Parks Department term for public restroom facility. It’ll be a LEED-certified building with a green roof and geothermal heating and cooling, and a wind turbine providing it its energy. And then the playground will also have a more sustainably-operated restroom facility and some better storm water management practices, and more playful and more distinctive play structures and opportunities

there, and sort of more topography that echoes the mounds within the site. So that's just about essentially establishing a design presence there, and to say 'this thing that was just a place before is now an interesting and compelling place.'

K: And different from – even just in the restrooms – different from the standard things you see at every single park.

R: Exactly: different than standard issue, and better than standard issue. So that's for those first initial projects, and then when the city's actually able to build and build out the sections of the site within the park – and they're doing that in twenty acre sections at a time – the first project in North Park is aiming to focus on the water, on getting people out to the edge of the creeks that infiltrate the site so that they can see how beautiful that vista is, and also see the creeks, which are very beautiful, and there's a lot of thriving wildlife around them. And then also to be able to take our -- the canoe and kayak program that we started and be able to branch into that, so that you're building a path to the water and then you're going to be able to recreate in the water, because that really is conceived as a very unique opportunity at that site that you can't do at a lot of other places in New York. And then after [North Park,] the first project in South Park, the first twenty acres will get people up on top of the landfill mounds so that you can actually see the rest of the site -- you can see the potential of the rest of the site. And that is one of the really unique things about the site, is these incredible vistas that you get from the top of the 120-200 foot landfill mounds, where you really do see the whole site, the whole region, all of the creeks, the wetlands, all of that stuff.

So, [the Parks Department is] focusing on the vistas and the unusual landscape, and then the particular recreational opportunities, which you will be able to have 35 miles of trail within the site when it's all built out. So providing opportunities for runners and cyclists and skaters to be able to preview some of that through some of these early projects as well as, ideally, there will be – there's a conversation advancing about building a horse facility on-site, so having some equestrian capacity to occupy parts of that site as well, and the city hopes that mountain biking will be possible there, and camping, things like that: where you can spend the day in this huge site that is still within your city and feel like you're in the country.

[1:13:18]

K: And I mean, [other New York City parks] don't have a lot of those things – they have horseback riding in Prospect Park, but you can't really do mountain biking anywhere, or camping out. So are they focusing on marketing the park as a new experience that you can't really get at Central Park or Prospect Park?

R: Yeah, I think that's important. It's not necessarily that this is better than Central Park or Prospect Park, but that this is its own thing, and you know this is a city – how many people just go to one park? Or just go to one whatever? They want to go and experience everything. So this is an unusual opportunity, or this is a site that distinguishes itself in this many ways. Another thing that I think will distinguish it is public artworks. Because it's such a big and expansive and open site, and with all this interesting topography, it really does avail itself for large-scale public artworks, so that's another thing the city is hoping to focus on on-site. And large-scale renewable

energy-generating facilities as well. The city just put out a request for responses about renewable energy generation on-site, large-scale, and so that's also stuff that will identify and distinguish that site, that there are these sustainable technologies that are operating in tandem with this public facility, and advancing that conversation as well.

K: So in incorporating these energy-efficient practices and getting LEED certification on the buildings, is the Parks Dept really planning to use Freshkills Park then as a jumping off point for teaching about recycling and environmentalism and consumption, and building some public programs off of that space?

R: Yes, and the agency's already started on that road, and that's the stuff—all of that stuff is what we started doing over the last four years and they'll continue. And the Freshkills Park Alliance will also continue to do that.

K: Now you had said before that there are a lot of other parks in Staten Island...

R: Right, borough of parks.

K: ...can you speak more to the other parks?

R: There are a lot of smaller parks, but then there are a lot of reasonably sized parks. There's Clove Lakes Park and Silver Lake Park and Blue Herron Park and the whole Gateway National Park that sort of is along the southern edge of the shore, the south shore of Staten Island, and moves into Brooklyn as well. And then there's the Staten Island Greenbelt, which is about 2800, 2400 acres I think, all together, or somewhere around there. In the low-to-mid 2000s, [it's] a constellation of parks that sort of occupies the middle of Staten Island and is adjacent, just across the street, and even around the edges of Fresh Kills. The Greenbelt operates as one entity under the joint management of the Parks Department and the Greenbelt Conservancy. And there's a Greenbelt Conservancy executive director who runs all of those operations and answers both to the board of the Greenbelt Conservancy and to the Parks Commissioner. There's a Staten Island borough Parks Commissioner just as there is in every other borough, and they run operations all over the island from your green streets to your huge flagship parks.

K: When's the first stage of the park set to open? The South Park, that's the first one that's going to open, right?

R: The first stages that will open are the perimeter facilities, so that's the Owl Hollow soccer fields and the Schmul Park and playground, and those will open this year, summer 2012. And that's about 25 acres altogether.

K: And then roughly when is the estimated date for the opening of the entire park?

R: The build out was expected to take thirty years, and it was expected to start in 2006, so the target date was 2036. I don't know how – what will happen faster, what will happen slower, 2036 is still a ways off. We could still, I think as a working date, assume 2036.

K: In planning for the park, what sorts of transportation options are being explored as far as getting people both from Staten Island to the park, but then also from the outer boroughs or from New Jersey or Pennsylvania?

R: So it is a Staten Island park, so every project must have parking facilities because most people on Staten Island drive, and that's something that we do get from public discussions on Staten Island, is that there has to be adequate parking for people to be able to use it. And then people from New Jersey also drive and are able to drive to the site, which is quite close to New Jersey. We talked to the MTA about developing bus routes potentially and they said, when you build it we will come, so when we have facilities we'll be able to talk to the MTA about altering bus routes so that public buses that criss-cross the island, but especially those that come from the ferry terminal will be able to stop at Fresh Kills.

A lot of buses already terminate or stop at the Staten Island Mall, which is right across the street from the landfill, and that's the biggest – I think it's one of the biggest transportation hubs. It's like the mall and the ferry terminal are the two places where the most buses stop on the island. So being able to co-opt some of those bus routes will be important. And then we've talked, we've been successful at partnering with the water taxi to be able to bring people directly to the site. We've also talked – the water taxi is really the preliminary passenger vessel that we've been able to have deliver people to the site, but as part of the master plan there are points in Fresh Kills creek, which is where the barges of garbage would unload, where the master plans identifies ferry landings for people to be able to have direct ferry access to the site. But that's again, that's a long term development.

K: How long does it take from say Battery Park to get there – if you're taking a water taxi—or you're taking a ferry?

R: It takes about an hour.

K: So that's not too bad.

R: It's not so bad. It's mostly that there's traffic in the Kill van Kull and the Arthur Kill because they're industrial waterways so it can't be the fastest ever.

K: What are some of the most common misconceptions that you've encountered with the Freshkills project?

R: That's a good question. One, that the landfill is still active, that our garbage still goes there. The landfill closed to new deposits of garbage in 2001, so it's been eleven years. Two, that it's just a big hole in the ground with a bunch of garbage piles in it. At the outset, in the '40s it was less sophisticated than it is now, and in the '70s and '80s there came to be these federal regulations that really outlined what had to happen and what could not happen in a sanitary landfill -- they're called sanitary landfills. And the Department of Sanitation worked for a number of years on retrofitting the site to install all of the requisite infrastructure to manage and contain the by-products of decomposing waste. So that's a very elaborate and very expensive infrastructure that's in the – I don't know how much money that's all cost – over a billion

dollars, I'm sure, that has been invested in that site over many, many years. So the fact that there is a lot of sophistication in the handling of garbage on-site is something that people are not aware of generally.

Sometimes people have the mistaken impression that the site is open, because we would do public programs on site and things like that. It was a little confusing [that] we would call it Freshkills Park: that is a confusing thing for people. So it is Freshkills Park, but it's not yet open to the public. It's still a work in progress. Other misconceptions...there can be misconceptions of scale, that it's considerably smaller or considerably larger than it is. It's 2,200 acres, but sometimes people think it's – scale is very tricky. People can say 20,000 acres, they can say 20 acres, and generally people don't really know what that means. It's 2.7 times the size of Central Park, and that's what we usually say. That helps put it in some perspective for folks.

K: How many football fields? I feel like that's always what people use [laughs.]

R: [Laughs.] You know, I counted this at some point, and I can't remember how many football fields it is.

[1:23:45]

Other misconceptions...the other misconceptions are smaller. They're about individual points of waste management, or ecology, or things like that, and those aren't – I certainly wouldn't have known any of this stuff.

K: Do you have people that are concerned about the gas [produced by the landfill]?

R: Sure, but that's a great opportunity because I have a great answer for them. I mean, we always have great answers for the questions about gas. People are concerned about the gas, the methane that's being released. The truth is that the methane is not released there on site; the methane, the landfill gas that's being released by the decomposing waste is captured in an elaborate system of pipes and wells that collect all of the landfill gas that's being produced and send it into a central processing facility where the methane is extracted from the other gasses and compressed and sold directly into the pipeline. There is a pipeline that connects on-site that's operated now by National Grid, and it goes directly to people's homes and to heating buildings on Staten Island. And that system is made more effective by the presence of an impermeable membrane that caps all of the waste in the landfill mound, [and] that prevents the migration of gas into the atmosphere, and allows the pipe system to capture all of that gas. So that's an example of people come in with their skepticism or their concern, and you're able to address those concerns by talking about these very intensely regulated and monitored and maintained ways in which that concern is being managed, and is actually being used productively.

K: So when the park finally opens -- I mean obviously that's a long way off -- or at least when portions start opening, how is the site's history as a landfill, and then also its role in the 9/11 waste processing, how is that going to be incorporated? Do you envision a semi-permanent exhibition at one of the entrances, or little things along the way, signs popping up, saying this used to be 'X'...

R: Yeah, so in terms of landfill infrastructure things that remain on site, there will be either physical or digital or virtual signage that annotates that stuff; walking tours, audio, anything like that. The details of that haven't been worked because we haven't had it [open] yet, but there will be signage. I mean, we did actually develop a bunch of signage both for the visitor's center, which is opening this spring, and for early projects in North and South parks that are physical signs that do go into some of that detail about the landfill. In terms of the 9/11, the World Trade Center materials that were buried on the West Mound at Fresh Kills, and also the enormous recovery effort that happened on top of the West Mound, to recover all identifiable belongings and human remains – that exhaustive effort that occupied that whole 500-acre sight for a number of months -- will all be memorialized in a monument that will occupy some significant portion of the West Park. There will probably be a public process to determine what that monument is when that point comes, but the West Mound hasn't yet been capped, so that process is an eight-year process of capping the West Mound, and that's only beginning this year, so it will be quite awhile.

K: What's your favorite part of the site?

R: Hmm, what is my favorite part of the site? That's a good question. I really like any part of the site where -- I know that the site has all of these really amazing vistas, but I really like the parts of the site where you can't see outside of it, where you just are inside of the site. So that's the lowland areas, like out by the edge of Main Creek, which is at the northern foot of the North Mound. You can look out over the Main Creek and you can see the northern tip of the East Mound, and you look out over the William T. Davis Wildlife Refuge, which adjoins the site. And it's incredibly beautiful there, and it's very peaceful and it can be very, very quiet. And you don't see the city at all, but you see tons of sky, and that's a great place.

K: Do you kind of see the park as sort of -- I feel like there's this both spatial and psychological separation between Staten Island and then the other four boroughs. Or maybe that's just my perspective as somebody lives in Brooklyn, but do you kind of see the park as a way to reconnect people that live outside of Staten Island with that part of the city?

R: Sure, yeah. I also see it is an opportunity for Staten Islanders to reconnect with the geography of Fresh Kills, and I really see it as a place where it was shut off or closed off to the public and the public imagination, and it was sort of this blank spot in a lot of people's cognitive map, because it's just like you're supposed to ignore it. But I see this whole process as a re-innervation, when you suddenly take the tourniquet off and blood has to flow to this part of your body. I see that as a place that has an opportunity to draw [people] in, because it hasn't had any of this saturated attention yet, or saturated activity and use as a public space. It's really an opportunity for the public, both on Staten Island and in the rest of the city, to re-acquaint themselves with it. And then in terms of being a draw for Staten Island, yeah, I think it could definitely be. It's a huge project and a huge, interesting place to do things on Staten Island, and I think it could be a big draw for people in other parts of the city.

[1:30:57]

K: So, wrapping up, why did you leave the Parks Department, and what are you doing now?

R: I left to spend more time working on creative projects of my own. So, the opposite of the reasons that I went to grad school, where I wanted to be more connected with other people and I wanted to feel that my work was valued and was being socially useful. I still want that, but I was sort of doing that for such a long time, that I really was missing spending this time just working on my artwork. I wanted that for awhile, and I'll have to figure out some balance of those two things for myself over the long term, and over the short term. Right now I'm working on some personal art projects and trying to help other people out with their projects, and just building some more skills and experiences and networks among people who make things in New York.

K: Do you think you'll ever go back to working for New York City government, or the Parks Department, or any sort of other city...?

R: Only time will tell. I have no idea.

K: So you're kind of open ended to where you want to go next?

R: Yeah.

K: That's good. So how is the Parks Department continuing the work that you did? Is there somebody that took over your specific job, or did they kind of absorb – the people in the department – kind of absorb your responsibilities?

R: There are some things that I was doing that have been absorbed, especially the grants management and some of the programs that continued over from last year to this year, like the Land Art Generator Initiative. Some of those projects that I was doing had been put on hold until someone new is hired, and I think the Freshkills Park Alliance will probably hire that person, and not the city. So, as the Freshkills Park Alliance is now coming into more established existence, I think that entity is trying to figure out what it needs to start creating a permanent, self-sustaining slate of programs and arts stuff that can happen on and off site, and outreach. I think that's what's happening now, is that what I was contributing is being formulated into some further future -- hopefully not too far in the future -- set of programs and staff positions, but right now there is nobody who has taken on this position that I left.

K: You were there a total of four years, right?

R: Yes, I mean I think it was about two weeks shy of four years.

K: So, that's a pretty significant amount of time to be at a job. How has the work that you've done at Fresh Kills impacted the way that you view the city, or the interaction between the city and its parks?

R: Well, I think that my experience was probably not comprehensive of what the city is. The city is pretty vast, but...

K: ..but your observations.

R: Yeah, right. I think – well, it definitely enhances my understanding of how big decisions are made in this city. Enhanced my understanding, and made me appreciate all of the people who have to make those decisions because it's not easy, and you do combat, you do face a lot of accountability and questions about how you came to those decisions. And so, I appreciate that, but I also -- but I worked hard and I tried to be responsible to a public, so I feel sympathy with people who are making those decisions too. So probably that's specific to my experience, in that I was one of them, so I have sympathy for them. Or empathy, or understand a little bit more about what the challenges are that they face. I have an appreciation for how much work, and how complicated the work is of stewarding public amenities, or making decisions on behalf of a larger populace, where you know that you will not satisfy everyone, you will upset some people, and you will please some people, and you have to be okay with all of those things. You can't please everybody, you will always be – people will always tell you that you're not doing as good of a job as you should be doing, and you just have to trust that you are doing the best job that you can.

K: What's the single most rewarding, or informative, experience that you took away from your time working on Fresh Kills?

R: Hmm.

K: It's a bit of a loaded question [laughs.]

R: Yeah, I don't know... I'll give two, because one of them is maybe not as optimistic. One is that everything that happens with, that relates to the public sector, is political. And that's something that I started to learn especially when I first started the job, but I think I got used to it after awhile. But it is definitely still remarkable to me that every decision, at every scale, that involves a public entity or a public asset is politically influenced. I think that was something that was very eye-opening to me. It's about people who have power and how they exercise that power, what kind of power they are looking forward to having, what kind of power they need to maintain, who they need to impress, who they need to rebuff, and it doesn't necessarily just involve your project, everything exists in this much wider network that is so complex and labyrinthine that it can be very confounding to try to navigate it.

On the more optimistic side, I will say that despite that, despite those politics and despite the challenges of bureaucracy and city governance, which are many and operate at many levels, we were able to get some things done. We made progress. In those sneak-peek moments, I was also like, "okay we did this huge thing - this was a big thing for us." And I also came to realize over those four years, with a lot of things that I had wanted to do that I was ultimately not able to do, or things that we tried and failed at – well, I don't know if there were that many things that we tried fully and failed at – but there were lots of things that I wanted to do, that we wanted to do and that we couldn't do ultimately. It's just that the project was not at that stage, and with a long-term project you have to accept that there are stages of capacity, and we were just at an early stage. And that was something that came to me very gradually, because it was very frustrating for a lot of the times, and I was coming to realize that this is a really big project, and you can't

get everything at the beginning. And you just have to accept that. And then once I came to more acceptance of that, I feel like I was happier with the smaller victories because they were still victories.

K: Alright, is there anything else that you feel that we haven't covered, or that you want people to know about Fresh Kills, about the project, or anything?

R: That was it.

K: Alright, cool. Well thank you!

R: Thank you.

[1:39:35]