

Hays Woods Project

Hays Woods

We decided to focus our residency on examining a proposed commercial development of a 635-acre urban forest on Homesteads western flank. The site had been coal mined in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries using room and pillar methods, resulting in acid mine drainage and other environmental damage. Later, its vegetation was mostly destroyed by air pollution from a nearby coke plant. Since then, the forest has done a remarkable job of healing itself, and currently provides habitat for fox, turkey, bear, migratory birds, people and a wide array of plants and other creatures. It is 2 ½ miles from the confluence of Pittsburgh's 3 rivers.

Pittsburgh Development Group 2 has recently acquired the site and has proposed to build The Palisades, a retail complex including a casino, horse race track, hotel, mall and upscale housing development. To prepare the site, the trees will be logged and the remaining coal will be extracted by Mountain Top Removal strip-mining methods. This will liquidate the forests natural resources. The sites 6 stream valleys and 3 wetlands will be filled with the overburden from mining, in order to level the topography for building. The revenue from the casino and racetrack, yet another method of extracting local resources will, as in the past, leave the region.

Why do the communities of the Mon Valley allow for the extraction and exploration of its natural resources and wealth? This is one of the primary questions that drive our investigation of the Hays Woods site.

Economic Issues in Mon Valley

The location of our Mon Conference residency was Homestead. This community is part of the network of post-industrial municipalities in the Monongahela River valley. These towns on the west slope of the Appalachians share the legacy of the steel industry in which the land, minerals, water, air and people were consumed in making steel. Steel was produced, but the profit and wealth did not remain in the valley. When the steel industry and its jobs departed, the Mon Valley was left with serious economic, social and environmental problems.

Homestead found a solution. They took their enormous brownfield mill site and collaborated with developers to create an enormous shopping mall called Waterfront. This upscale retail, entertainment and housing development has been successful beyond the dreams of the planners. However, because of Waterfront's TIF arrangements, the city of Homestead must wait many years before it can receive tax revenue from the development.

The Waterfront complex is situated next to the Monongahela River, and is decorated with huge machines, the relics of the steel industry that has been gone long enough that young people have no first hand recollection of it. They carry a vague romantic notion of that past. As life long residents of Pittsburgh, we recall a less romantic past.

Is retail development and upscale housing the only solution for the impoverished mill communities of the Mon Valley? Is salvation retail consumerism, with the profits taken by absentee investors?

Residency Program in June, 2004

During the residency, we focused on specific issues regarding the proposed development. Our goals were:

1. Defining information about the site and the proposed development
2. Creating a positive identity of the natural attributes of the site and communicating that identity to the stakeholders.
3. Propose alternative ideas for the use of the site.

Post Residency Activity

After the residency we continued to work on the Project. We connected with representatives from The Sierra Club, Penn Futures, and G.A.S.P. This coalition had been working to challenge the development using their network of support, which included lawyers, politicians, scientists, community activists, and foundations. Through strategic thinking and action they have been able to stall development by applying attention and pressure to the development's permitting process with state and federal agencies.

Working as a part of the coalition has expanded our understanding of the development process. It has also been a profoundly frustrating experience. In the initial stages of the project, the primary goal was to stop the destruction of the woods by mining. As time passed and the developer's permits were denied, the final disposition of Hays Woods became a focus of concern. The majority of the group believed that if the development was stopped and the site changed ownership, it was acceptable to develop a part of the woods so that a part could remain intact. Tom and I work towards finding a solution to keep the 635 acres forest whole.

We continue to work with the coalition towards the overall goal. We are also working to expand the dialog about Hays Woods and urban greenspace. We presented information at the S.E.J. conference. We have planned an exhibition, *Hidden in Plain Sight, the Forest in the City*. We are also working with landscape architects to plan a cherrette on the subject of Hays Woods.

Proposal for the Groundworks exhibition

We have synthesized the information we collected and our experiences during and after the residency program to create an installation that consists of three-dimensional objects, video, computer generated images and text.

Wall 1 and Pedestal 1: Introduction of the site and development

Pedestal 1. 30” x 70”. Developer’s proposal and estimate of damage.

On a pedestal will be 2 sculptures, the developer’s proposal packet, and text. The sculptures will be approximately 14” x 30” x 5” each. The first transparent sculpture will depict the landscape as it currently exists, with its internal coal seams. The second sculpture will represent the site as it will be after logging, MTR and valley fills.

Wall 1

Naming 1

The forest was known as “The Old LTV Site”. This name has a brownfield connotation. We renamed the forest Hays Woods and took several actions to present the name to the region. It has been gratifying to see that Hays Woods has become the publicly accepted name for the site.

In Groundworks we will present a video of one of the sequential word sign installations used to communicate with people driving past the site. The video will be presented on a wall-mounted monitor. Support text and graphics of all 3 sets of signs will be mounted next to the video.

Poster

Text was created and paired with an image of a Hays Woods’ waterfall to create a poster designed to instill a sense of value and quality for the woodland. Website and contact information was included. Copies of the poster were given as gifts to foundation representatives, politicians and other interested parties. At Groundworks, the poster and text will be displayed on wall 1.

Naming 2

None of the site’s 6 streams had names; only state reference numbers identified them. In libraries in communities adjacent to Hays Woods, we staged events to name the streams. During Children’s Story Times, the librarians read children and parents stories about forests and animals. Then, we told the children the story about the secret forest nearby and the fact that the streams had no names. The children drew pictures of the forest and named the streams. An image of the children with their stream names will be displayed. Text will be provided near the image.

Wall 2. Video documentation of community politician and nature

Value of the Natural world

Video 2

In the Mon Valley, depressed communities seek solutions for economic problems using old models. We will present a video interview with the mayor of Homestead in which some of the pragmatic reasons for these decisions are expressed.

Video 3

If Hays Woods is developed, all of the animals which live there will be driven to surrounding communities where their fate is uncertain. Because they cannot flee the site, the plant community will be destroyed. We will present a video of some of the animal

and plant residents of the forest. Their voiceless images will stand in contrast to the mayor's spoken remarks.

Both videos will be projected on the gallery wall. Text will be provided near the 2 videos.

Wall Three and Pedestal 2: Alternative ideas

Bridge Triptych

If development occurs, we propose that the developer create bridges so that the plants, water and animals have a means of escape. The Bridge triptych is a computer-generated image that depicts these escape routes. Text will be included next to the images.

Pedestal 2 30" x 70"

Our proposed development for Hays Woods

Hays Woods is currently functioning at its highest level. There is nothing needed to improve the site. Hays Woods has one of the largest interior forests in Allegheny County. The forest has repaired itself from the damage caused by mining and air pollution. It is a living laboratory in which the mechanism of repair is evident in the ecology of soil, plants and animals. It is important that this organic mechanism be studied and documented so that the methods Hays Woods has used to heal itself can be employed in other compromised settings.

On a pedestal will be a 3 dimensional map, which indicates the interior forests, streams, meadows, wetlands and other pertinent features. Text will be included next to the sculpture.

