

Flotsam Weirs

Williamsburg Cultural council proposal: Artist's vision for 1 Mill street, Williamsburg, MA site.

Introduction

Growing up, I spent a large portion of my free time along the banks of the Potomac river in Maryland— walking, sitting, painting, swimming and writing. I discovered this spot at the end of Mill Street last April, while working on the greenway feasibility committee. The place and the smell of the rushing water mingled with the earth reminded me of days past and kindled an interest in celebrating this place that illustrates the forces of hydrology and successional ecology. Traces of water courses etch their ways through the mutable banks and landscape of this spit of land. Nests of material seemingly placed with meticulous intention illustrated where eddies had swirled flotsam and receded. These nests of flood material, resembling weirs or woven barriers for trapping fish, are the inspiration for the project.

Flood plains are rich with the deposits and debris from upstream. During the Spring melts, swollen rivers wash down and inundate the land with rushing, powerful waters that shotgun through channels and reshape the landscape across scales. While I knew that I was safe along the banks, there is something chilling to me about thinking of the ominous force of waters rushing down the valleys of the surrounding hills, through the channelized portions of town and churning through the quiet, dry area I was standing. The traces left by that force are at once awe-inspiring and softly poetic.

The area where the flotsam weirs would be located is at the confluence of the East Branch of the Mill river and the West Branch of the Mill river. This spit of land, owned by the Historical Society, and a private land owner, offers views of both rivers in a forgotten area of town. These rivers shaped the history of the town and were financial drivers of the town. A dramatic flood destroyed large portions of Haydenville and parts of Williamsburg in 1874. Where before, the river played a fundamental part in the lives of town members, one is hard pressed to find areas along the riverbanks to enjoy the beauty, and learn about the ecology and history of the river.

Section A

The weirs would move through the site along the existing informal path and would be segmented to allow passage of wildlife and heavy volumes of water. Materials would be sticks, and other plant material carried down river and deposited by floods arranged into a woven fence using saplings as structural support. No materials would be brought into the site, or removed and the ground would not be disturbed. No materials would be used to hold the weir together - only gravity. It is expected that after a winter and spring, the weirs would degrade, and site would return to its previous appearance.

Section B

Flotsam Weirs would help to bring a renewed consciousness the people and visitors of Williamsburg about the river as a beautiful and wild asset at the center of Williamsburg and Haydenville. Through the lecture and art installation, people could learn about the power of hydrology, flow dynamics and the resilience of ecology. In this spot, there is evidence of flooding, with the remnants of flotsam (debris from floods) stranded by high water. There is also the foundation of the old bridge, as well as the large channel walls to contain the flow of the river upstream from the immediate site. In the spring, native ephemeral plants like Solomon's seal and Dutchmen's breeches populate the site, and along the banks are prints of river otter, raccoon and deer.

Through out all stages of the process, there would be photo and video documentation, with the end result being a book that illustrates the process of installation, the finished work, and dismantling of the piece. This book would be presented to the Meekins Library as a document of the project. The duration of the project is intentionally set to be ephemeral to mirror the changing nature of ecological dynamics, and to not interfere with ecological processes of flooding and nutrient deposits.

At some point, once the project is completed, and before it is dismantled, the artist would give a talk, and lead a tour through the installation for interested people. This talk might occur at the Meekins library, and after, the attendees could visit the site.

Section C

With extensive experience designing landscape on multiple scales as well as experience as a project manager at several small design firms Todd is qualified to handle the creation and installation of a landscape that will be aesthetically pleasing, culturally relevant and beneficial to local ecologies. The Williamsburg Historical Society has kindly granted permission for this installation to be created on their land. The Meekins library has generously offered a venue for a lecture to occur. I would promote the project through social media on my website, as well as placing advertisements in the library for the lecture and site visit.

Dimensions:

Multiple sections of woven fence

Materials:

"Natural material" from floods; sticks and tree limbs

Title: Flotsam Weirs

Outline for installation and completion:

Fall 2013

Resources required for installation:

gloves, lopers, garden shears