

TEACHING LANDSCAPE ‘TRIAGE’ THROUGH FIELDWORK: SITE ANALYSIS AT WHITE PARK, MORGANTOWN, WEST VIRGINIA

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1 ABSTRACT

West Virginia University students contributed to site analysis through fieldwork at White Park, a brownfield and urban forest with pockets of old growth, layered cultural history and a convoluted network of trails. An irregular grid of circular berms covers White Park: these served as firebreaks for spills from oil tanks during the 1890s-1950s, when oil tanks periodically caught fire from lightning strikes. Superfund monitors White Park’s levels of soil contamination from metals and volatile organic compounds, but only a few of the 46 tank wells on site are known to be mitigated.

White Park’s oil tank well berms vary in diameter and include some concentric outer rings and straight segments – features similar to prehistoric Native American mounds in the region. Some trees at White Park, predating the US Civil War, show bark scars echoing ‘tomahawk rights’ blazes that settlers used to claim territory. White Park’s historically and ecologically significant terrain is also used for recreation: the park’s 170 acres are covered with an incredibly tangled web of trails, favored for mountain biking and ROTC military training.

Students’ incremental analysis (2014-2018) of this complicated site was supported by faculty’s research of the park’s cultural history as the site of Native American and early pioneer settlements and oil industry. White Park’s complexities challenged students to design for multiple objectives: remediate oil contamination, interpret cultural history, and minimize trail user conflicts. This project has applicability for educators as a case study of a complex cultural landscape site analysis project requiring incremental collection of field data from a public site. This service-learning effort encouraged thoughtful problem-solving which benefited both students and the community. In 2019, students’ landscape triage design approach informed professional analysis and planning work, and will continue to inform master planning, trail work, and public interpretation at White Park.

1.1 Keywords

Site inventory, brownfield, witness trees, trail design, urban forest, cultural landscape, service-learning