

Fort Hancock In The 21st Century

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Growing up in northeastern Monmouth County, I was quite fortunate to gain a close familiarity with the natural wonders of Sandy Hook at a very early age. I treasure memories of surf fishing for Striped bass off the beach with my Dad in the Spring and Fall. When conditions were 'on' during the warmer months, I would race down to surf the long point break waves of the Big Cove, a surf break that, at its best, has few, if any rivals on the East Coast. We also took advantage of the history lessons the park had to teach, walking down Officers' Row, visiting the oldest lighthouse on the East Coast and exploring the battery installation that protected the entrance to New York Harbor through multiple wars. The value of these memories is priceless, as is the natural playground that Sandy Hook provides for all of our citizens. Unfortunately, one indelible bad memory of my experiences at Sandy Hook endures. At 55 years of age, I have watched for more than half a century as the buildings that once comprised the Fort Hancock installation have fallen into steep, almost irreversible decay. This is a sin, one that has been allowed to continue for far too long. But as it has become fashionable to comment in recent times when contemplating the initiation of a complex project, 'It is what it is.' Better to have a challenge to rehabilitate than nothing to rehabilitate at all. While the prospect of renovating the buildings at Fort Hancock promises to be a difficult and

complex undertaking, the reward of doing so in a historically responsible, environmentally aware and socially conscious manner would be enormous.

What this project needs more than anything else is a strong vision, but not just any vision. A strong, central, comprehensive and inclusive vision is demanded. The disparate interests of a great many unique entities are all legitimate and worthy of inclusion. Without a strong central vision open to including these entities as legitimate stakeholders, the project runs the risk of failure, a risk the NPS cannot afford to take. What follows are my thoughts on just the type of vision that is needed.

Prior to even attempting to plan for the renovation of up to 35 buildings in an environmentally sensitive area, careful consideration must be given to the eventual end use of the buildings. This consideration has been divisive enough to bring earlier attempts to initiate a project of this scope to a halt. Better to address these divisive elements from the start, and make efforts combine these interests into a whole. There are many that feel that honoring the historical significance of the site is of paramount importance. These concerns are well grounded. By virtue of its location near the tip of a 6 mile, 1665 acre mostly undeveloped ocean and bay front barrier spit of land, the buildings at Fort Hancock offer an unparalleled location from which to base educational facilities engaged in maritime, littoral and marine biology research. It would be a significant error to not take advantage of the educational opportunities offered by the location of the buildings in a near perfect marine laboratory by supporting ongoing educational enterprises. There are also at least two non-profit organizations conducting good works of environmental advocacy from buildings located on the site. Clean Ocean Action and The American Littoral Society currently make their headquarters in the buildings. Certainly any plans for renovating the buildings should proceed with an effort towards accommodating these organizations and the vital work in which they engage. Finally, there are many who strongly believe that the renovation of the buildings at Fort Hancock

represents a unique commercial opportunity. The controversy surrounding this consideration needs not introduction. Some feel strongly that allowing a commercial enterprise to establish itself within a National Recreation Area borders on sacrilege. Yet other parks within the NPS make the most of allowing commercial enterprises. The Grand Canyon and the multiple hotels located within its borders comes immediately to mind. The ongoing effort to establish a destination spa at The Presidio in San Francisco sets an interesting example of what might be accomplished at Fort Hancock. We are all familiar with the long history of The Seagull's nest at Sandy Hook. The renovation and ongoing upkeep of 35 building is not going take place without considerable expense. A significant revenue stream is vital to helping underwrite the cost of the entire project. A world class hospitality facility located in an oceanfront paradise just 17 miles from the tip of Manhattan in New York City would certainly represent a compelling commercial viability. Structuring the project as a private-public partnership might be a workable solution to financing the project, one that finally sees the entire undertaking get off to a start.

A number of diverse uses for the building stock at the Fort Hancock complex have been identified. There are certainly historical responsibilities to keep in mind when evaluating the project. The use of some of the building stock for educational purposes is also a requirement. Environmental and social uses must also play a role. Finally, there solid arguments for adding a strong commercial dimension to the project. While these considerations are diverse, and, to a degree competitive, they are by no means mutually exclusive. There are 35 buildings within the complex. That is quite a few buildings to work with. Finding the right mix of all these potential uses and melding them into one overall harmonious vision for the complex is the key to the success of the project.

When evaluating the potential uses for the buildings, there are certain concepts that will need to be in alignment. Historical and environmental concerns dovetail nicely. First among many requisites would be the requirement that all building be renovated so that all

exteriors remain just as they were when the buildings were first constructed. This would preserve the overall historic appearance of the project. Interiors would need to be re-constructed with the proposed purposes for the individual buildings in mind, but at least a few of the different types of buildings would have their original interiors recreated. These buildings could be utilized as museum space, for historical re-enactments or for park related educational experiences. The entire complex should remain free from private motor vehicles, The road along the front of Officers' Row that hugs the bay should be turned into a pedestrian promenade, navigable by walking, bicycle or handicapped accessible shuttle, but free of private motor vehicles. A single parking lot placed in an inconspicuous area near the complex could be constructed to accommodate visitors to Fort Hancock utilizing private cars. While all buildings would retain their original exteriors to preserve the overall historic integrity of the project, perhaps 4 buildings would also have their original interiors recreated in order to perform dedicated historical functions within the complex.

The potential for educational pursuits to be explored from the buildings within the complex is limitless, but sadly underutilized. One of the unique marine environments in the entire country surrounds Fort Hancock. Our New Jersey research institutions must have facilities to study the environment accessible from within the park. At least 4 of the buildings within the complex should be made available to New Jersey universities or colleges at subsidized rates for educational purposes. Princeton, Rutgers, Monmouth, Stevens, TCNJ, or perhaps a consortium of several like minded institutions would then be able to provide their own input as to what they would like to see these facilities equipped with. It seems likely they would need laboratories, classrooms and some type of housing for teachers and students. These institutions have their own architecture and design departments. Why not allow the architecture programs at these schools to perform the design work needed to modify the interiors of these buildings to comply with their own ideas for utilization? While at it, why not enlist the help of these programs in the overall design for the renovation of the interiors of any of the buildings for which interior

design change is contemplated.? It would allow our state's high level design students to work on a unique, 'real world' project while saving a considerable amount of money for design expense for the entire project.

At present, I am aware of at least two non-profit, environmental advocacy organizations that make their headquarters in a building along Officers' Row. The American Littoral Society and Clean Ocean Action both make their headquarters on the site. While both of these organizations do vital work on behalf of those of us that enjoy the oceanfront environment, the facilities that they work from are less than ideal. They should continue to be accommodated as they are now, but should be encouraged to play a role in determining how their spaces might be modified to better suit their ongoing missions. There are other additional roles that the buildings within the complex at Fort Hancock have the potential to provide. Our society needs to provide for the rapidly expanding segment of our population that is entering their golden years. Our seniors would benefit by including a dedicated Senior Center in the plans for the project. With all of this work being contemplated for the area, as well as ongoing work by institutions within the complex (MAST), the number of workers finding employment with the project will surely swell. A child care facility within the complex would be of great utility to those finding employment with the project as well as those working in the greater park. The dedication of 4 buildings to environments and social roles within the complex would serve a vital role in addressing environmental as well as societal care issues.

At this point, 12 of 35 buildings have been theoretically assigned roles promoting historical preservation, educational uses and environmental and social altruism. Of course, these numbers are fluid and completely open to discussion. But it is a starting point. This would leave an additional 23 buildings. A well considered and appropriate commercial use for these buildings should be strongly considered. The cost of all this work will be impressive. There needs to be a way of funding the work, as well as the ongoing upkeep and

maintenance on the newly renovated buildings. A responsible, well considered commercial enterprise could play just this role.

Sandy Hook is a world class waterfront location. It has beautiful ocean and bay front beaches, exceptional fishing, 1665 mostly untouched natural acres, assorted wildlife, historically significant buildings, and most important of all, a central location proximate to one of the world's significant population centers. The area cries out for world class hospitality facilities. Lodgings that allow visitors to spend their nights in close proximity to our nation's natural treasures are not without precedent. I myself have spent time at The Bright Angel Lodge at The Grand Canyon and found it to be a world class hotel. Similar facilities exist at Yosemite and Yellowstone. Plans for The Presidio in San Francisco envision a high end destination spa. Perhaps 20 of the buildings within the Fort Hancock complex could be retro fitted for use as guest lodging. It is not difficult to envision the buildings as bed and breakfast type accommodations, with several private rooms coupled with public spaces like living rooms parlor spaces and galleries. The building exteriors are already equipped with large covered porches from which guests might enjoy watching the sunset over Sandy Hook Bay. While equipping the guest room buildings with cooking facilities would probably be inappropriate, renovations of the buildings to include multiple dining options would give guests as well as other park users some interesting alternatives. A mid- to higher end establishment would be a welcome addition to guests at the complex while quite possibly becoming a distinct and desired destination in its own right. A more family oriented, snack bar type facility offering more modest fare as well as between meal treats like ice cream would aim to satisfy more universal tastes. The dedication of space for use as meeting and conference facilities would offer the corporate customer a beautiful natural environment to conduct off-site retreats just 17 miles from Manhattan. With a chapel on the grounds, the property would undoubtedly become a much sought after wedding venue. The theatre located on the property would make a wonderful forum at which concerts and theatrical productions could be staged. Movies could also be shown when

inclement weather makes outdoor activities less attractive. While not entirely sure of the specific ratios to apply when designating purpose specific space within a hospitality destination, I am convinced that the faculty and students at the Cornell School of Hotel Administration would be an excellent source of guidance. There is also great potential at the location for site specific retail concerns. These establishments would dovetail nicely with the hospitality facilities. The newly completed bike path makes the need for an expanded bike rental outlet crucial. Similarly, an establishment renting kayaks and other small craft for water exploration would probably enjoy great success and enhance the experiences of visitors to the park. Perhaps outdoor oriented retailers like LL Bean or Orvis might jump at the opportunity to operate an imprint at Sandy Hook. Orvis is famous for conducting fly fishing tours and clinics, as well as guided nature and bird watching tours. These are already popular activities within the park, and the addition of an old pro like Orvis would only broaden the appeal of these activities to park visitors. Finally, Sandy Hook is one of the premier windsurfing destinations on the East Coast. A specialty windsurfing retailer would be a natural for location for location within the complex. The potential for success of certain carefully considered commercial activities among the renovated buildings within the Fort Hancock complex is enormous. The potential of those activities to ensure the ongoing economic viability of the entire facility by providing a sizable and predictable income stream is not something that should be dismissed lightly by those interested in a sustainable future for the Fort Hancock trove of buildings.

The prospect of renovating 35 building is steep decline is not without substantial 'fear factor.' It certainly promises to be an expensive one. There are, however, some good reasons for optimism. There is a significant amount of infrastructure already in place. There are good roads in and out of the site. The location is already served by utilities, with water and power readily available. The sites for the buildings are already determined, and the foundations are probably in better condition than the rest of the building structures, so large scale groundwork is probably

unnecessary. Perhaps best of all, there already exists a highly relevant historical model for guiding the stakeholders through the entire process. The history of Nantucket Island has many lessons to teach. By the mid 1960's, Nantucket Island, once the nation's most prosperous whaling port, had fallen into steep decline. Once home to 20,000 people, the population had dwindled to 3,500. Unemployment, alcoholism and drug abuse were at epidemic rates on the small island. The town's waterfront and most of its downtown building were in a horrid state of neglect and disrepair. Into this morass stepped a visionary named Walter Beinecke. He believed that if he restored the waterfront and the historic buildings in the downtown area, he would be able to create a world class tourist destination. Slowly, and at rock bottom prices, Beinecke secured the purchase of the waterfront facilities and about 100 buildings in the downtown area. With a meticulous eye for his historic responsibilities, Beinecke restored all of the building with precise historical accuracy. I spent some time working for Mr. Beinecke, and he was nothing if not a demanding taskmaster. Very quickly, downtown Nantucket and Beinecke's restored buildings began to attract talented innkeepers and higher end retailers. Yachting enthusiasts and land based tourists were not far behind. By the mid 1970's, just 10 years after initiating his project to restore the waterfront and downtown buildings of the island, Nantucket had become arguably the premier waterfront tourism destination on the East Coast. The summertime population has increased to well over 50,000 (with visitors well over 250,000), while the year round population increased to over 10,000. Beinecke, whose investment in purchase and restoration costs initially ran to about \$10 million, sold his Nantucket properties for \$55 million in 1987 to First Winthrop Corporation, a Boston based property investor. A 450% return on investment over 22 years is pretty spectacular wealth creation. This is in no way to suggest that the buildings at Fort Hancock be renovated and sold. It is simply a means to show how Beinecke's experience on Nantucket with First Winthrop exemplifies the value that financial professionals place on restored buildings like those possible at Fort Hancock based on their rental value. By tying the renovation of the

Fort Hancock buildings to proprietary leases on the buildings, the same type of value creation can be accomplished.

I have spent a great deal of time both on Nantucket and Sandy Hook. Sandy Hook is every bit as beautiful as Nantucket and has even more recreational potential. If anything, the potential for value creation is greater at Fort Hancock than on Nantucket. Fort Hancock's location is far closer to major population centers than Nantucket's location is. Additionally it is served by mass transit from Manhattan in less than an hour. The central theme here is that planning for carefully considered commercial activity at the Fort Hancock restoration project is the single most viable means to insure that the project gets completed in a manner that ensures its future. It is a project I would very much like to be a part of.