'In a world where privacy is a luxury, the gardens offer a sense of solitude and a space unburdened by the architectural constraints of incarceration'

DOING THYME

The inmates of New York's infamous Rikers Island jail are digging deep to find peace and a sense of freedom in their prison garden

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'NO SPACE IS TOO SMALL TO BE BEAUTIFIED,' reads the curriculum for inmate gardeners at Rikers Island. Inside the chain-link fences and beneath the cylindrical barbed-wire overhangs, ten small green spaces, designed and planted by prisoners, provide rare moments of tranquility inside one of New York's most notorious correctional facilities.

This is GreenHouse, a horticultural education programme run as a joint venture by The Horticultural Society of New York (The Hort) and the US Department of Corrections. Ten correctional centres make up the vast prison complex on a diminutive island sandwiched between the Bronx and La Guardia Airport on New York's East River. Every week, around 500 incarcerated individuals step outside for two hours of horticultural education a day.

The first garden at Rikers Island opened in 1986 when 2.5 acres of bare land was transformed by inmates into nature gardens, bringing life into a complex where violence and brutality is all too prevalent. Since then, the programme has expanded to include ten organic gardens, where both detainees and inmates grow vegetables, fruits, herbs and flowers, tending everything from ornamental cacti to carrots. Some spend their time weeding the medicinal herb garden located behind one of the main housing units, while others delicately prune bushes in the rose garden. Peter, one of the inmates that photographer Lucas Foglia spoke to while at the prison, summed up the importance of the horticultural activities: 'It's the only place where we feel like human beings.'

Established in 1932, Rikers Island has an infamous reputation. As of December last year, an estimated 8,700 inmates were incarcerated on the island. Around 85 per cent of the population are detainees awaiting trials that can take as long as two years to come around. The other 15 per cent are serving sentences of 12 months or less, largely for non-violent crimes.

In 2014, a government report criticised a continued 'culture of abuse' inside Rikers, condemning the rampant use of unnecessary and excessive force; the high numbers of serious injuries; regular inmate-on-inmate violence; and the excessive and inappropriate use of prolonged solitary segregation. Just months before, photographer Lucas Foglia had driven along the Rikers Island bridge – the only way onto the island – at the crack of dawn to document the prison gardens.

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‘Rikers Island had recently been in the news for brutal treatment of detainees and convicted prisoners,’ Foglia says. ‘I think, in the context of so much bad publicity, they wanted to promote something they do well.’ The photographer was granted three days access to the gardens, which was later extended following a period of lockdown during his visit.

One of the first prison horticultural therapy programmes set up in the US, Rikers’ GreenHouse teaches students about the basics of botany, landscaping and sustainability, how to grow vegetables and herbs, how to make herbal cosmetics, the art of flower arranging, and nature-based arts and crafts. ‘The programme generates up to 417lbs of organic fruit and vegetables a year,’ says Foglia. Much of the harvest is used in jail kitchens, while the excess is donated to homeless shelters and soup kitchens in New York state.

Inmates must apply for the programme. Non-violent offenders are favoured, with the majority of gardeners either awaiting sentencing or serving short sentences for low-level crimes including drug possession, petty theft and prostitution. Despite Rikers’ violent reputation, Foglia noted that the gardeners were relaxed within the green boundaries of the outdoor space, delicately tending plants, indulging in fresh produce and enjoying each other’s company only metres away from buildings where riots, violent assaults, solitary confinement and lockdowns are a regular occurrence. He was acutely aware of the contrast: ‘Outside the gardens, I was always accompanied by a guard, but inside the gardens I wandered freely,’ he says. ‘The time I spent in the gardens felt jovial. It surprised me, given the institution that surrounded us.’

Immersed in the world of plants, inmates spoke openly. Peter told Foglia about his corner shop back in Queens. The photographer discovered that another student, Lauren, had grown up in Long Island, near where he went to high school. Even the guards conversed more freely. ‘It was as if, in that green space, they were all just people growing vegetables and complaining about bad weather,’ Foglia says.

For their labours, the prison gardeners only receive $20 for 20 hours of work a week which, if they owe legal fees, they will never see. But The Hort suggests that the gardening offers more than economic gain. The programme’s curriculum is embedded in horticultural therapy and aims to teach students responsibility (without the burden of failure), self-confidence and self-esteem while, in the long-term, offering access to the wider world outside of the stifling prison experience.

After ‘graduation’ from the GreenHouse programme (and release from prison), budding horticulturalists have the opportunity to join the GreenTeam in New York City and begin a vocational paid internship organised by The Hort. Working on year-round projects and learning about plant care, landscape design and garden maintenance, the second part of the programme offers participants the chance to rebuild their lives outside of prison. It aims to help them avoid reoffending and to provide skills that enable a productive post-jail experience. Beyond manual labour, it encourages students to pick up the soft skills of time management, responsibility and workplace professionalism.

And the programme works: GreenHouse has seen a 40 per cent reduction in reoffending rates, and more than 300 inmates have earned apprentice gardener certificates. Considering that most students complete the GreenHouse programme in six to 12 months, the success is staggering. But the programme’s future is uncertain. In April 2017, the Mayor of New York, Bill de Blasio, announced his intention to close Rikers Island after repeated publicity of violent and abusive incidents. Within 10 years, the city aims to reduce inmate numbers and relocate inhabitants to four smaller, local jails spread across the city’s five boroughs.

Despite 30 years of expansion on the island, there’s no word on what will happen next to the Rikers’ initiative. Responsibility for a small but beautiful patch of land offers the inmates stability, support and perhaps, a sense of freedom in a closed-off world. For the gardeners of Rikers Island, the continuation of a horticultural therapy programme seems critical. •