

The Rikers Island Jails of New York, the largest jail complex in the United States, runs the horticulture program called the Green House Program. Among 14,000 convicts in the entire jail, about 125 of light offence inmates are under the Green House Program. This Horticulture therapy program is already celebrated to be efficient in healing the inmates by nurturing them with ecological lifestyle that restore and prepare them for society outside the prison after they are released from sentence. In its more than two and a half acre landscape, The Green House Program provides education for a new perspective and reveal to a new life value to the inmates, vocational training and development for hands-on experience and skills in horticulture.

In comparison to the 65 percent rate of re-offense of the inmates of normal jailing system, the Green House Program has only 5 to 10 percent rate of recommitted offences.¹ James Jiller, who was the director of the Green House Program in Riker Island Prison and the author of “Doing Time in the Garden: Life Lessons through Prison Horticulture” claim that the Rikers Island Green House Program is distant from the traditional prison farms where agricultural labor is seen as punishment; according to Jiler, Green House Program is about developing the actual hands-on agricultural skills, counseling, and healing and rehabilitation through human nature interaction.¹ With this therapeutic power of exposing a person to a nature, the Green House Program has exceeded its effect on the inmates, by educating and resetting their mindset, changing their quality of life, a way for reflection, an action of reversibility and restoration.

Horticultural Therapy, an ancient practice of human healing and rehabilitation through gardening has been acknowledged to have significantly therapeutic to the ill, elderly, and others.² The horticultural therapy is a the most earth-friendly and healthy

way of improving one's physical and mental wellbeing, stress reduction, and learning to reconnect and appreciate nature, all members of one's community, and healing our lives.³ Several studies and projects have already been made to prove its effect; in 1982, San Francisco County Jail counselor Cathrine Sneed, proved that healing effect to the prisoners in jail, is especially significant: "working in the garden transform even tough, mean, and lay inmates, (to) discover the joys of nurturing life and watching it blossom—often a big contrast to their past experiences of destruction."³ Sneed's Garden Pin 1993 was held "to support ex-inmates and those "at risk" in the community to better their lives" and sustain healthy life in the future.³

Another project that show the healing effect of gardening to people's lives is a Places of Change Show Garden of Chelsea Flower Show that showcased growing opportunity, skills ... "to help people develop the skills necessary to bring about lasting changes in their lives (and) ... release from the pressures of daily life, and, most of all, hugely therapeutic."⁴ It is told by Richard Cunningham, the project's funder, that the project "(is) about helping people develop the necessary self-confidence and skills to make real change and move on with their lives."⁴ Likewise, the Green House Program holds its objective to make change in life of the inmates.

Both studies above portray that gardens become a way of healing and restart for the people of unstable background, history or hindrance. The effect is greater and more significant to those who need support and opportunity to start again. To the inmates of the Rikers Island Green House Project, the Carrolle Banfield, the director of the Green House project said that the project is highly successful and is "therapeutic for them (... and through being in the nature the inmates) get taken away from all the madness."⁵ As nature

sooths people's mind, body, and stress; Roger Ulrich, a professor of behavioral science at Texas A & M University announced that nature becomes "a positive distraction" because "looking at nature produces a reduction in stress within three minutes."⁶

The approach that the Green House Program takes is not against the traditional method of the prisons where they keep the prisoners inside and make them feel trapped, which only makes their anxiety and anger grow—but this project approaches from the opposite perspective, to keep them in the open space, challenging them to restrain from running off, and the inmates grow through these challenges. Instead of using high walls and fences around the boundary of the jail, the open landscape of the Riker Island chose to use a more less threatening and stressing means of setting the boundary. Using different levels of visual complexity depending on the level of security risks, the height of the plants and garden that surround the area create a not-as-threatening to the inmates, just enough for them to know the boundaries of zone they are allowed to pass.⁷

Amy Lindemuth, who studied the landscapes of the jails and prison complex asks "this kind of approach implemented in ... landscapes in a prison or jail setting that offer more visually or experientially than lawn and fences... (and) the context of this open space (within the prison complex) and the staffs and inmates' (perception of) such spaces.⁷ Lindemuth notes that "(inmates) felt calmer when the facility offered more visually complex views... (and such) can improve the physical and mental health of corrections staff and inmates.⁸ Sense of security, instead of threat and not unnecessary stress of the inmates, through this mild boundaries creates the trusts to the inmates. Thus, being in an open prison and completely enclosed jail room has significant difference in re-establishing the self-esteem and value of an inmate. Open landscapes, which cannot be

seen much in most jails, provide therapeutic benefits and become a restorative source outside their daily life.⁹ Landscape architect Jan Satterthwaite defines the importance that “therapeutic garden at a hospital special involves an understanding of what might help ‘transport’ people away from the medical process or the medical center.”⁹ Satterthwaite means to take people away from daily medical processes and giving them break form exhaustive routines. The Green House project utilizes this understanding of therapeutic essence of gardens and landscapes.

Along with gain of sense of security and putting trust onto the inmates, reversible positioning and reflection is a part of healing to the inmates of Green House Program. Keith H. Basso affirms that “places possess a marked capacity for triggering acts of self-reflection, inspiring thoughts about who one presently is, or memories of who one used to be, or musings on who one might become.”¹⁰ Proved in Catherine Sneed’s Garden Project, working in the garden helps to reflect upon oneself and by supporting and helping the others through donation of food they grew, the people who were there “because they hurt people... (now) have a chance to help... (which is a) part of the healing.”³ Through growing and consuming food, the inmates of Rikers Island learn the importance of community and raise their self-esteem and significance to their being, that they can be help, not harm. It is the same notion as what Mark Zivkovic noted in his paper and during a seminar, “as a writer who protects nature now I am a writer who nature protects.”¹¹ The reversibility of growing in oneself while growing food the collaborative works that inmates go through in the farming process is a process of healing.

The Green House Program provides a chance for feeling acceptance, acknowledgement and accomplishment, which they have not had before. An inmate

under the Green House project mentioned that growing and working on the farm gives a sense of accomplishment and “takes away the feeling that you're incarcerated.”⁵ To many, to be incarcerated and to enter the jail is a lot of pressure, and a sense of offense. The idea of going behind the bars for a considerable amount of time of one’s lifetime, especially those in their teenage years, is a great loss. Yet in Rikers Island the staff and the inmates know by fact that a person with mistake can be given a chance and can learn more when they acknowledge and feel their mistakes themselves. Through agricultural work inmates lean to cooperated with fellow inmates and “in the company of other people, ...it is one these communal occasions when places are sensed together.”¹⁰ Sharing the time and experiencing the healing power of the Horticultural therapy in Green House project with fellow inmates, the company and the shared experience in the Rikers Island aid one’s growth and adjustment to a landscape that educates a new perspective.

Green House Program helps reduce inmates and workers’ stress. Stress is a significant issue that creates a tense atmosphere of prisons. However, a sense of being in an open space, instead of locked in an enclosed room of cold concrete is a restoration to the inmates of Rikers Island. According to Lindemuth, “gardens and natural settings can be physically and psychologically beneficial for inmates and prison staff in terms of reducing stress and alleviating mental fatigue.”¹³ A “long term exposure to ... high stress and violence plagued prison subculture” of criminal world and its cycling pattern cannot be therapeutic or helpful to the inmates.¹² Very little stress shows in horticultural societies like Rikers Island prison, and little stress in prison means better relationships in one’s personal life.¹² In other words, little stress gained from the Rikers Island prison affects the inmates’ enhanced social relationship after the release.

The sense of incarceration is a significant source of stress to the inmates. In the inmates' understanding of imprisonment the sense of being locked in and controlled means being judged or punished. With their low self-esteem, the inmates are released when they held grudge and anger toward the society, increasing the risk of their reoffend. Not many prisons can prevent this, but the Green House Project helps the inmates' self-esteem, appreciation and understanding of the imperfect society.

Gardening and agriculture is a process to the inmates' growth in themselves and their way of finding their new sides and increasing their persistency that can also lead them to settle themselves in agricultural jobs. DOC Deputy Commissioner Kathleen Coughlin, quoted in "City Limits" journal, stressed "nurturing characteristics can be brought out in them ...we can connect them to work, we can change their entire trajectory when they get out. You can change a life."⁵ The Green House Program does not just change the inmates' perception of plants and agriculture but also prepares them for a new start outside the Rikers Island.

Many prisons are just another repetition of "a genesis of a new criminal world."¹² Prisons are not for controlling the troublemakers of the community and not just for holding them there for a while away from the community to keep the community safe. The idea of jailing is changing the inmates and exposing them to a better view of life and the Green House Program does the great effect of changing the inmates and their view in life.

If "places come to generate their own fields of meaning," as Keith Basso mentioned, the meaning of Rikers Island correlates to Lindemuth's description, "spaces to reflect and grieve, (where) inmates can heal from the circumstances."^{16, 8}the meaning

of Rikers Island is a new opportunity for the inmates and a place of healing through reflection oneself, a place to wash away one's mistaken values in life and misunderstanding of society. It is a place where one can prepare to real life in their life.

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