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The Transformation of Fairfield Hills

On a summer weekend, Fairfield Hills campus is the most active place in Newtown, Connecticut. Driving into this 760-acre campus, you will first notice many locals walking their dogs through the two mile loop that goes around 16 buildings, several sports fields, and beautiful grass lawns. The buildings and activities on this campus reflect the thriving community culture and rich history of Newtown. The town has maintained the early 20th-century Georgian style of the buildings, characterized by red brick exteriors, classical columns, and pedimented porches, which gives the campus a classic boarding school feel. The youth and community presence brings so many Newtown residents together, yet there is a daunting history carried on this campus that is impossible to ignore.

While several of the buildings are currently occupied by businesses or town organizations, the rest are empty - abandoned, boarded off, splintered, and dark. Before the campus was a town center, it was Fairfield Hills Psychiatric Facility from 1929 to 1995. Prior to opening its doors, the only psychiatric institutions in Connecticut were Connecticut Valley Hospital in Middletown and Norwich State Hospital. In the 19th century, psychiatric care largely emulated European ideals of “moral treatment”. The type of care offered in asylums centered around recovery for the “mentally insane”, and aimed to avoid isolation and harsh restraints. Such institutions were predominantly private, and while they made the most money from wealthy people sending

family members, they also accepted poorer men and women.

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In the early 1900's, the demand for long-term psychiatric care exploded. Industrialization and urban migration meant families had less space and time to care for mentally ill family members, and state institutions offered a much more affordable option. The presence of state psychiatric asylums also surged due to broader definitions of mental illness, allowing people to be eligible for admission because of mild depression or anxiety, developmental disorders, addiction, or dementia. As hundreds of patients filled the asylums in the Great Depression era with limited resources available and understaffing, the idealistic moral treatment methods quickly took a turn for the worse. Strict isolation and abuse was commonly faced by many patients, especially those who could not do work for the facilities and contribute to the self-sustaining environment on these campuses. When Norwich State Hospital opened in 1904, it housed 95 patients. The overcrowding occurred instantly, and even the development of a campus with several buildings still required the new Fairfield Hills Hospital to reallocate its patients. Fairfield Hills was designed by notable architect Walter P. Crabtree, who was involved in making multiple historical state sites, such as the Ernest R. Burwell house in Bristol. Crabtree's Georgian style of architecture was seen on Fairfield Hills campus through the accented red bricks, building symmetry to promote a "therapeutic feel", triangular pediments, village-like atmosphere, and open lawns. The 16-building campus was considered massive at this time, and there was even more space for facility construction if needed. The original campus contained administrative buildings, food halls, patient housing, and underground tunnels to connect wings. When the doors officially opened in 1933, 500 patients had been reallocated to Newtown from Connecticut State Valley and Norwich State Hospital. At its peak in the late 1960s, Fairfield Hills Hospital housed more than 4,000 patients, 20 doctors, 50 nurses, and 100 other employees.

The Fairfield Hills asylum exemplified a broader lack of knowledge surrounding mental health during this time period, with untrained nurses, abuse and isolation of patients, and unethical surgeries that had little to no scientific support. Each year, hundreds of patients underwent psychosurgery, including hydrotherapy, insulin shock therapy, electroconvulsive therapy, and frontal lobe lobotomies. Several stories from staff members describe how patients were “zombified” following lobotomy surgeries. Rather than promoting patient improvement through evidence-based treatments and procedures, they aimed to change the fundamental aspects of these individual’s personalities. Like many other psychiatric facilities across the country, all the buildings were connected by underground tunnels to transport patients and equipment between buildings.

The operations of the hospital ended in 1995, following deinstitutionalization efforts that aimed to shift the care of individuals with mental illnesses from long-term psychiatric institutions to less isolated facilities that promote autonomy and human rights. This change took off in the mid-1900s, when the civil rights movement produced laws that incorporated and desegregated different categories of people. The introduction of antipsychotic medications such as Chlorpromazine, as well as protests for humane treatment of mentally ill and neurodivergent individuals pushed deinstitutionalization forward. Hundreds of long-term psychiatric asylums closed down, causing patients to be moved to community health centers, nursing homes, family care, and unfortunately homelessness. When Connecticut Governor, John Rowland decided to close Fairfield Hills, the 100 remaining patients were moved to Connecticut State Valley Hospital, while almost 500 of the workers were left without a job.

Furniture, bathtubs, surgical tables, and even patient’s blood was all that was left of the

campus as it was completely abandoned and set to rot. The time period after the closing was also

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filled with curious individuals who explored the ins and outs of the deteriorated buildings. People discovered a bowling alley, a morgue, basements, gymnasiums, and more. While the asbestos and mold never scared people away, many of the buildings were closed off or fenced, and the tunnels were welded shut due to vandalism and trespassing. Fairfield Hills campus spent time in the pop culture spotlight when it was featured in *Fear*, an MTV show that brought contestants to the abandoned and alleged haunted locations to be pranked. The 1996 movie *Sleepers* was also filmed here, which casted stars such as Brad Pitt and Robert De Niro.

The renovation of the Georgian style buildings started in the late 1990's, when the Canaan House was rented by the Town of Newtown into the Board of Education, Planning & Zoning, and Volunteer Ambulance Corps. The town preserved the original style of some of the exteriors while transforming the interiors into functional facilities for the community and businesses. For example, the Newtown Youth Academy draws in hundreds of adolescents and parents a day for basketball tournaments, tennis matches, after-school programs, and weight lifting. Other notable spots on the campus include the NewSylum brewery, Reed Intermediate School, Newtown volunteer ambulance, and a farmers' market. Despite the changes, the long and controversial history of the psychiatric asylum remains obvious to any visitor. The history of Fairfield Hills is still honored and reflected throughout the campus by the maintenance of the original structures and protection of the properties. It is certain that the campus will continue to serve the community and be a third space for Newtown residents, but the fate of the remaining abandoned buildings is unknown. While many want to repurpose the buildings, functional facilities may

only be possible if these buildings are knocked down due to weak foundations and the presence of asbestos and mold. As of 2025, 2 buildings are being considered for apartment renovations from a Boston Developer, but no official or public action has been taken yet. While

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discussions continue around the redevelopment of remaining buildings, Fairfield Hills also contains important natural networks that exist alongside the constructed landscape.



Bridgeport Hall as a hospital building and a present-day brewery (Newtown Historical Society, CT insider)

Fairfield Hills contains a hydrologic network that includes the Pootatuck River and Pootatuck River Aquifer. The river flows quietly and largely unnoticed through Sandy Hook, adjacent to the northeast side of Fairfield Hills. Rainfall on the Eastern portion of campus drains to this river, while rainfall on the Western side of campus drains to Deep Brook River; Both of these end up in the Housatonic. The Pootatuck river and aquifer act as interdependent systems that exchange water through permeable stratified drift deposits, which yields significant quantities of water to wells and springs. The permeable layers of the Pootatuck aquifer layers contain gravel

and sand sediments, while the confining beds are composed of a thick glacial till material that prevents the transmission of water between layers. The raw groundwater is considered unsafe to drink directly, but it can be pumped and filtered. A hydrogeologic analysis from Fairfield Hills *Description of Existing Conditions* found that 4 million gallons of water are available to be pumped out as potable water each day. The Town of Newtown regulates and protects the aquifer, as there are 3 wells in Fairfield Hills capable of pumping approximately 2.3 million gallons per day from this network. The town has constructed regulations and limited development around this aquifer protected district to ensure the drinking water supply is not

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contaminated. Only certain business and educational facilities can operate here, and dwellings must be occupied by single families. Strict regulations are crucial for this hydrologic network and the health of the river ecosystem because pumping over the sustainable limit of the aquifer reduces river flow and increases the risk of water contamination by lowering groundwater levels.

Fairfield Hills also contains structural networks, such as the underground tunnel system. This was functional when the campus was a psychiatric hospital from 1929 to 1995. For a facility containing 4000 patients and 200 employees at its peak, the tunnel network allowed for efficient management and movement of patients between several buildings. Additionally, underground networks ensured control in a time when mental health facilities prioritized isolation. Before deinstitutionalization, hospitals like Fairfield Hills were closed systems that separated patients from society. The internal transfer of patients and structured pathways directly reflect the order maintained by the hospital. Similar to the Pootatuck aquifer, this network was primarily out of sight, but played an important role in the physical landscape. The tunnels were also used for the movement of utilities and medical supplies, including steam pipes, water,

electricity, and surgical equipment.

Since the renovations started in the early 2000s, the Town of Newtown has fostered the growth of a rich social network in the 760-acre campus. Today, crosswalks located directly above underground transport tunnels are used to connect soccer fields and food truck stands, a dog park to walking trails, and baseball fields to the NewSylum brewery. Social networks are seen through the hundreds of people each day who participate in sports, movement, family time, and getting food or drinks. A landscape that once existed in a quiet corner of town to treat and operate on thousands of patients is now tangential to a major collector road, connecting the campus to a large community network. Similar to the management of natural systems and networks on

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campus, the redevelopment of existing buildings was guided by a strict plan and regulatory process.



Topographical map of Fairfield Hills campus (topoView)

In 2002, the *Description of Existing Conditions* was produced by the Town of Newtown and the Ad Hoc Fairfield Hills Master Plan Committee, which listed and described eight of the buildings on Fairfield Hills Campus that had the greatest potential for reuse. Team members for the Master Plan Review Committee and Newtown residents took several tours and collected extensive data on the building's structures, location, conditions, and characteristics that impacted the ability to re-use the spaces on campus. Aesthetics of the buildings were also taken into

account, as the town wanted to bring a more vibrant and community-centered sense of character to the campus, which contrasts with the original construction that prioritized isolation and order.

One of the buildings that was recently repurposed was Stratford Hall, located on the west side of campus adjacent to the main entrance. Stratford Hall was constructed in 1933, and was one of the smallest buildings on campus at 9,000 square feet. Despite this smaller space, the interior was grand with an open-concept, which makes sense considering it originally functioned as a dining hall and a library for the psychiatric hospital. The building resembled the style of many other structures here through its brick exterior and strictly symmetrical layout. The sloping asbestos shingles roofing sat on a long steel truss. On the inside, there were five large round-top windows on each side, similar to the arching windows in the Wilbur Cross Library at the University Of Connecticut. Large steel beams encased in concrete were placed throughout the interior and ascend up to the multi-story ceilings. This space was considered a plausible option for renovation, primarily due to the exterior which held up well. As is every building at Fairfield Hills, however, the damaged interior, heating, and insulations were causes for major consideration. Not only was repair needed, but there was no functional heating, A/C, or insulation in the building as a result of a prolonged steam leak. Interestingly, the *Description of Existing Conditions* predicted that Stratford's dramatic interior made it a strong candidate for becoming a restaurant with a bar and lounge. In October of 2017, a letter of intent was signed by two men for a brewery to take over the building. Renovations started in 2019, and the NewSylum Brewery officially opened in March, 2020. This demonstrates how the town committee's long-term regulatory planning helped preserve its vision for reuse of the site. Another building that has been restored into a venue that serves the Newtown community is Bridgeport Hall. Similar to Stratford Hall, it was constructed in 1933. At 68,000 square feet,

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this building was considered to be one of the finest buildings on campus prior to restoration, with dramatic spaces and durable finishes that made it a great candidate for remodeling. Its original

functions included kitchen services and it was a dining hall for patients and staff. There was also an elevator to the partial basement that connected to other buildings through tunnels for transporting meals to patient dorms. The tall ceilings were typical for a dining hall, while the brick exterior and asbestos shingle roofing reflected the architectural style of the rest of the campus. Bridgeport Hall received lots of natural lighting through the Palladian style windows, which are symmetrical three-part windows with a large central arching window and two shorter rectangular sections. To be considered for restoration, this hall would need heating, air conditioning, insulation, and woodwork restoration.

One concern regarding Bridgeport Hall and other original campus buildings was the lack of handicap accessibility. Improving accessibility to spaces through ramps, wider doorways, and elevators was necessary for complying with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. The emphasis on transforming each of these spaces through accessibility reflects compliance to new laws, but it is especially significant given the building's history as a psychiatric institution. One of the primary themes of the campus's transformation was shifting from isolation to inclusion. Encouraging accessibility is symbolic of the commitment to equity and integration made by Newtown.

In the 2002 *Description of Existing Conditions*, the board committee claimed that the taller spaces in Bridgeport Hall could serve as multi-purpose rooms for the town, host banquet services, or private events thanks to the functional kitchen. They also discouraged using the space as a gymnasium, since plans were already in place to construct the current

86,000-square-foot, three-story fitness center. The Town of Newtown selected Bridgeport Hall as the location for its new municipal offices, and it was opened on November 21, 2009. In addition

to the board members involved, an extensive team of scientists were involved in the detailed analysis of necessary electrical, mechanical, and plumbing systems. For example, the Chair of the Master Plan Review Committee, Deborra Zukowski, has a PhD in electrical engineering from MIT with over 30 years of experience in information systems research and development. Robert Rau, another member of the committee, holds a PhD in Chemistry, with a long career in the chemical industry. Variation in the backgrounds of volunteers while including local voices is an effective strategy to produce a safe and functional space for the community. Having experts in engineering, chemistry, and infrastructure ensures that the integrity of the physical structures made in the early 20th century will be eligible for re-use, or if an entire new structure needs to be built from scratch. Renovation can save money and preserve materials, but only if the buildings are structurally viable. Including local residents is necessary for transitioning the identity of the space and getting trust from the community. The final plan prioritized what the residents wanted, such as parks, walkways, youth centers, local businesses, and space for sports and markets. Without these voices, it is easy for a space on a major connector road to become a businesses-centered location that reflects an outlet or mall rather than serving the people of Newtown. This collective community teamwork produces a space that fosters meaning and positive experiences.



Fairfield Hills Campus in 2011 (Davis, News Times, Local Groups Eye Fairfield Hills Campus)

Fairfield Hills has personal meaning to me due to my family involvement when the campus was a mental health institution, as well as my own childhood experiences in the modern version of the landscape. Having never met my biological grandfather, I have found life stories a key way to connect with his legacy and memory within my family. One aspect of him that always stuck out to me was his career as a psychiatrist. My mother has told me great stories of the patients he has helped with his empathetic, curious personality. It wasn't until ten years ago that I learned he was a physician at Fairfield Hills Hospital. I was unintentionally made aware of this at a wedding, when a man I had never seen before approached my mother and grandmother and broke down into tears. He recognized the last name of my family, and told us how my grandfather helped him overcome his depression and suicidal ideations. Despite never feeling his presence, I found that this emotionally loaded interaction showed what my grandfather meant to others, and defined his life through an impact rather than a personality or memory. Not only did this moment teach me the kind of person my family comes from, but it also gave me a more

personal relationship to the history of Fairfield Hills. The place that had always been associated with haunted feelings and crazy people now revealed a sense of greater purpose. While the operations of the campus occurred at a time when scientific understanding of mental health was limited, there were positive outcomes resulting from well-intentioned workers. Looking back on this interaction years later as someone with greater knowledge on deinstitutionalization and psychiatric asylum history, I understand how this man's testimony about my grandfather revealed the importance of reintegrating psychiatric patients with society. Fighting the stigmas of mentally ill people being permanently sick and encouraging social connections for long term progress is crucial for better patient outcomes.

The Fairfield Hills campus also evokes positive and nostalgic emotions through the time I spent here as a child and adolescent. The most populated building on campus, Newtown Youth Academy, was a place where I spent my winters playing basketball and flag football, and also running around at birthday parties. While reminiscing on these times brings excitement, I feel the greatest emotions from the familiar sensations each time I go back. The smell of turning pretzels in the lobby reminds of all the times I begged my parents for food after a practice. The slippery pellets in the worn-down turf field brings me back to the unified sporting events played here in high school. And each time I watch my younger brother play basketball here, I see a resemblance of my younger self enjoying youth and spending time with friends.

The physical layout and natural landscapes of the current campus also adds to the personal meaning of Fairfield Hills. The winding layout of the two-mile bike trail took me through the different scenery and showed me there are many sides to this campus. The campus opens with wide grass fields and beautiful flower beds. Immediately upon entering, the active use of the

campus is revealed through the soccer field bordering one side of the entrance, while

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families play pickleball on the opposite side. The grand village style is apparent by the 86,000 square foot town municipal center directly ahead of the entrance. The immediate visuals of the buildings puts into perspective what it took to hold thousands of people here at one point in time.

From this entrance space, a bike trail winds past the soccer field and through wooded areas toward the rear of the campus. As it curves behind the developed and active front section, the landscape noticeably changes, revealing the original abandoned structures. The Fairfield House, Litchfield House, and Bridgewater House are each well over 50,000 square feet and share similar designs to the new, repurposed buildings, yet they are in a completely different condition. Vines grow up the three-story buildings and travel to the interior where the windows are shattered or completely gone. The white columns at the front doors have exposed darker wood beneath with rotting and deep fractures. This dramatic contrast between the renovated, active buildings and deteriorating structures is a topic of controversy amongst people in Newtown.

The biggest building of concern and controversy at Fairfield Hills is the Kent House, a 200,000 square-foot monstrosity that lies in between the Newtown Youth Academy and the soccer fields. The restored buildings have a welcoming feeling to them and show the campus's progress, while the abandoned spaces feel stuck and spark a sense of unease. The Kent House has a cupola, which is a towering structure that often sits on the roofs of Georgian Style buildings. This cupola, however, sits in the meter-tall grasses in front of the building like a decapitated soldier being left to decompose. Many Newtown residents have called out the local town government for not tearing down this building, as it conflicts with the campus's current identity. Multiple businesses, including a bank and museum have attempted to be placed here,

but there has been no progression with this.

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The beauty in Fairfield Hills is visible from every angle, yet the unsettling feelings from the abandoned structures force a sense of caution and respect for boundaries into me. As a young child, I was incredibly curious to explore every part of the campus, but I also didn't need trespassing signs to keep a safe distance. Not only were these spaces physical locations, they also shaped my sense of freedom when I was first allowed to go outside on my own as a kid. The community setting allowed my parents to trust me and was an opportunity to become familiar with landscapes while connecting to all the different worlds within the campus. There was a time period following the closing of Fairfield Hills as a psychiatric hospital where the primary activities on campus were vandalising and trespassing the property, or exploring for haunted, demonic spirits. Today, this location is considered a safe space for people of all ages.



Three cupola's sitting in the front lawn of the Kent House (Daniel Sobo, Atlas Obscura, Fairfield Hills Hospital)

Fairfield Hills is a place where layers of history remain visibly obvious in the current day. Some people in Newtown call this space a living contradiction, as it represents competing ideas of inclusion and isolation, as well as preservation and decay. Further understanding this campus

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as a historical site taught me that even with radical change, a place never fully stops reflecting its

origins or the people who shaped it. In the textbook, *The Making of the American Landscapes*, Michael Conzen describes how landscapes have been shaped by different cultures, and each group has left an impact on the modern day landscape . He reminds us that no place is a “blank slate”, but rather an accumulation of different ways of living, ideologies, resources, and community presence over time (Conzen 33). By keeping the historical buildings, Fairfield Hills is a great example of how landscapes are affected by the past. The abandoned buildings and fields on the campus do not function as they used to when the facilities were a mental health institution. This change does not mean that these spaces are without purpose. Keeping the buildings standing preserves the history of Newtown and reminds us of the past culture through the designs and layout. Walter P. Crabtree’s architectural goal of making the campus feel like a village or boarding school is still observable on the campus, but it serves a different purpose today. When Fairfield Hills was constructed a century ago, the design and layout of the institution prioritized privacy and exclusion from society. Today, distant and isolated parts of campus have connected the community through ball fields, walking trails, driveways, and dogparks. Symmetrical brick buildings with grand doorways now open into a cafe, municipal center, ambulance bay, and athletic facilities rather than patient dorms and operating rooms.

The current state of Fairfield Hills raises the difficult question, how should we engage with landscapes and historical monuments that represent a period of immoral and unethical actions? The past history of isolation and inappropriate, harmful patient care that took place at Fairfield Hills Hospital feels unavoidable and may impact many people personally affected. In some ways, the preservation of the campus has allowed for the normalization and continuation of stigmas surrounding mental health institutions. For example, the filming of the MTV show, *Fear*,

staged “ghost” narratives on campus and turned the former psychiatric hospital into

entertainment. This can turn the unethical historical practices here into spectacles or entertainment.

Fairfield Hills suggests that the history of a landscape doesn't have to be strictly erased or preserved, but rather transformed. This means that the traces of its complicated past remain visible in many ways while dominant themes of the modern landscape have moved toward community and inclusion. The youth and community centers bring together people from across the state and the athletic facilities serve as a major host site for special needs sporting events in Fairfield County. The transformation of the campus's functions accomplishes great things for the town and state, all while leaving evidence of a controversial history. Modern landscapes can uphold the interests of people by connecting them to each other and fostering community while connecting to the past in a way that allows for reflection.

The future development of Fairfield Hills is uncertain and can move in several directions, including knocking down buildings or repurposing current structures into apartments, a museum, or an assisted living facility. I feel confident in what lies ahead for Fairfield Hills knowing that the town has worked hard to honor the original architectural styles while protecting the natural aquifers, grasses, and wildlife. Involving both local voices and a committee of scientists has led to a beautiful space that supports families, youth, and nature.



Photos from the tunnels and hallways that make up the abandoned buildings in Fairfield Hills (Dobi, New England Ruins, Fairfield Hills Hospital)

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