

Hutchinson Island

Looking down from the Talmadge Bridge halfway between South Carolina and Georgia, there's a small island. From above, it doesn't look like much but a collection of mismatched buildings littering the vast green landscape. On one side of the island, there's a convention center, high-income housing, and the luxury Westin hotel (With Spa and Golf Course). On the other side, underneath thick layers of weeds, dirt, and spray paint, are a concrete factory and an old racetrack. The different buildings poke out like headstones, each one representing the past lives and potential futures of Hutchinson Island.

I decided to travel there with a close friend and a Savannah native, Apex. He has been living in Savannah his whole life, 21 years of local knowledge. On the island, he and his brothers would get chased by the cops for drag racing on the NASCAR track. He's also one of the few people who can say they've made it to the top of the concrete factory, "Up there, you get a whole new perspective of the city."

Alongside the entrance to Hutchinson there are banners and signs pointing to the luxurious south side of the island: "Convention Center This Way!", "Turn Left for the Westin Hotel!". We turn right.

We come to the end of an empty gravel road. The concrete factory, with its six large silos, is covered in rust and paint. It towers ominously on the other side of a fence, its silhouette stands out on the horizon. Razor sharp wire spirals across the fence and

there's a light pole with two security cameras. The remnants of a security system. A small sign on the fence: "GPA Police. No Trespassing. Violators will be Prosecuted". "ACAB" is scribbled over the sign and the cameras are shattered, hanging by a frayed wire.

"We used to have to grab, like, three comforters and toss them on top of the razor wire to climb over," Apex says, climbing on top of a barrel where a section of the wire is cut away, "But now it's easier."

Private contractors have been fighting over this property since 2005. There were rumors that the area would be transformed, turning the concrete factory into condos. But now, almost 20 years later, the factory still stands and the "for sale" sign out front has been replaced by a "no trespassing" sign. The bureaucrats couldn't decide on what to do with the building and how to fund it, so it has been reclaimed by the people.

Walking into what was once a fully operational concrete mill is now a haven for artists, skaters, and thrill-seekers. The artists claim territory through their graffiti. Local tags like "LOGO" and "SWAMP" show up on almost every surface. The trouble here is actually being able to find a blank wall to paint on.

The skaters have taken a section inside, which I have been visiting every now and then. Walking through the boiler room, there's a connected warehouse where

golden rays beam through the ceiling and onto the open floor below. Rubble has been swept off to the sides and underneath is a smooth, skatepark-like concrete.

Only the real daredevils will climb to the very top of the factory, but it's a tough journey. "You have to be really committed if you want to go to the top," Apex says, "It's pitch black inside the silos and you have to climb up a bunch of really sketchy steps."

We climb a rusty ladder through a hole in the roof. At the top, we throw a couple bricks and bottles off, watching them shatter on the ground below. The factory may be abandoned, but there is still an apparent potential in it, and this potential shows up all across the island.

Taking the road further down, the pavement starts to change and the road widens into an intersection. To the right, a dirt road accompanied by a wooden sign "US Army Corps of Engineers Depot". To the left, a strip of black and white checkered paint, stacks of old tires, and an empty straightaway. Just around the first curve of the racetrack there's a blockade, no access to the full track.

"You should park facing the exit so we're ready to dip at any time." Apex advises.

I pull the car around, nice and nestled under a low hanging branch. Hopping into the interior, we are met by a golden meadow. It's quiet and peaceful where the sounds of screeching tires and rumbling engines once rang through. The outside has been

reclaimed by drag racers wanting to live out the glory days of NASCAR racing. Their fresh tire marks cover the pavement. The inside of the track has been reclaimed by nature. Birds, rabbits, and squirrels have made it their home.

Further down the road, the Westin Hotel (With Spa and Golf Course) and the Savannah Convention Center dominate the island's skyline. Everything lies under the shadow of these two buildings. The streets over here have a fresh layer of black concrete and multiple construction projects are underway. The parking lots are filled with Ford Escalades and BMW Sports Cars. We try entering both. In the driveway for the Westin, "No entry. Valet Parking Only". In the driveway for the Convention Center, "No Parking. Drop off and Pick up Only". The red Honda family-sized SUV stands out from the typical white and black luxury vehicles, so we are turned away.

On the way back, an ornate wooden sign peeks out from behind a tree: "The Reserve at Savannah Harbor". Old, dead leaves crunch beneath the tires as we turn into the entrance. Weaving through a maze of mansions, different colored Ford F1-50s sit in every driveway. Old, white people mill about, toting around their tennis and badminton rackets. Men in white suits and brimmed hats stare us down from their green backyards. Then after a couple more houses, the perfect suburb abruptly stops. It's become a ghost town. All around us are the half finished remains of high-income housing. Everything is laid out, the driveways are pre-built and construction equipment is just lying about. PVC tubes with assorted cables stick out of the grass like a

graveyard. An old woman with glamorous, dangling earrings bikes past. She stares into the car as if we're the odd ones out. She seems happy to be living out here.

"Hutchinson Island is racist." Apex swats a horsefly off his neck, shaking a can of spray paint. He stands in one of the half-finished driveways, "And why're they tearing down President Street when they got all this already started?" (President Street is home to one of the largest homeless encampments in the city of Savannah. But the area is currently being renovated to make space for a brand new grocery store, condos, and "President's Square".)

Venturing deeper into the backyard jungle of the Reserve, the grass gets taller and the atmosphere gets quieter. Faded street signs with names like "Tournament Way" and "Reserve Way" take us through more half-driveways and finally up to the end of the road. There's an overgrown gate: "ROAD CLOSED". Locked behind it is the well-trimmed grass of the golf course. The sounds of laughing, teeing off, and golf carts echo out from beyond the fence. On our side, rattling spray cans, camera shutters, and skateboard wheels echo right back.