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Journey Writing

Professor Lourie

The Moran Plant

The Moran Plant was built in 1952 by the city of Burlington, Vermont. With coal, it powered the entire city until the 1977 when it became the first wood chip burning plant in the United States. With the city’s need for a new kind of power, the Moran Plant shut down the late 80’s, and hasn’t been touched since.

The New Moran Plant organization is a non-profit that plans on turning this derelict brick landmark into a community hub. Unlike other similar projects (The New York City High Line, Mass Mocha, The San Francisco Ferry Building, etc), the Moran Plant won’t be just one thing. It will be a combination of many different things. All designed to benefit the Burlington and greater Vermont community.

There are three main sections that the new version of the building can be broken down into. The first is a market space; a place where various makers will be posted, brewing beer, roasting coffee, that kind of thing. The second section is office and co-working space given to mission driven business, both for and non-profit. The third section of the building is event space. Imagine concerts, conventions, winter farmers markets, and art installation, all able to take place in the same multi-use hall. These are lofty goals, yes, but still achievable with the right team.

When you first step inside the bright blue doors that mark the entrance, you are confused for a moment. Your eyes need to adjust to the dark, and once they do, you find yourself in a large room. It’s dusty and bare minus two tables, one with a pile of white hard hats on it, the other with waivers that you have to sign before moving deeper into the building. You are handed a hardhat and beckoned through a door off to the right side that you didn’t notice until now.

And then, suddenly, there’s light. And not just a little light, either. The whole plant is there before you, laid out in a magnificent display of concrete and rusted metal and beautiful chipped paint. The building is large- over 45,000 square feet as it currently stands. The space is cavernous, but not in a way that makes you feel small. It is somehow welcoming an overwhelming all at once.

It is strange to stand there in silence, to take it all in. You stand in a concrete ghost, the remnants of what used to be. This space once held so much energy, so much movement. Now it is still and silent. The boilers are gone. The coal is gone. All that remains is a concrete exoskeleton, but somehow that energy is still there. You can feel it.

The Moran Plant is no longer just a reminder of the past. It is an idea, fuelled no longer by coal, but rather by the wonderful people working behind it. The Moran Plant is now a reminder of what’s to come, holding the potential energy to become much more. With a little help and time, it will, too.

I’ve been lucky enough to spend the past couple of months as an intern for the Moran Plant. People ask me what that means and I’m usually honest with them; I’m not entirely sure. It has been a mixture of a lot of different things, but somehow even so I’ve ended up falling head over heels in love with the building. I attribute this to the actual building, but to also the people who run it. The Moran team- and I call them a team because that’s really the most accurate description of what they are- are a group of incredible people, all gathered together to move this project forward.

I spent the majority of my time with two of the three co-founders, Erick Crockenberg and Tad Cooke. When I was first introduced to them, I was surprised. They are only a couple of years older than me, fresh out of the University of Vermont. Most would frown upon the idea of two twenty-four year olds running a non-profit that has such an impact on a community, wondering if they have enough knowledge of how a project this big works in comparison to someone older and more experienced. I soon learned that their age is anything but a drawback. They’re both smart and driven and passionate about what they’re doing, and their age brings a fresh perspective to the project. I was lucky to be able to spend so much time with them.

The following collection of vignettes is supposed to give you an idea of how I have gotten to know Erick and Tad, and a couple other Burlington movers and shakers along the way. My time at the Moran Plant this spring has been anything but your typical internship, and I wanted to show that through the memory of a couple of instances I’ve had over the course of the last couple of months. The building has been explained time and time again, and formal portraits have been painted of all of these people, but actually getting to know them through the small everyday occurrences is a whole different experience. These people are wonderful, and what they’re working towards is amazing. They deserve to be recognized for the work they do.

“P.S. Dress warmly.” I thought of their parting words in their last email. I was wearing four layers on top, two pairs of pants, a hat, a scarf, and gloves. Between that and a tolerance for the cold to begin with, I was set. Then again, I was still in the comfort of my warm car.

Nobody else had arrived yet. I waited quietly in my seat, hands in my lap. In front of me was the eastern shore Lake Champlain. I watched the half-frozen waves undulate towards me and wondered how cold the water was on a day like today. Even with the seventh Harry Potter audio book blaring out of my Subaru’s speakers and the low hum of the stationary engine trying to keep me warm in negative five-degree weather, I could still hear the wind outside. Maybe another pair of socks would have been a good idea.

I waited another fifteen minutes or so until another car pulled up a couple of spaces away from me in the parking lot. It was Charlie Tipper, the 3rd of three Moran Plant co-founders. We had met once before, but only in passing. About 50 in age, he still looked quite young. My mother attributed this to him being “very active,” which came as no surprise. Burlington is known for how healthy and active its inhabitants are.

I turned off my engine and grabbed the paper work I had been asked to sign in advance. I jogged over to where he was getting out of the car.

“Kate!” he said. “I’m so happy you could make it up here!” We shook hands. I was certainly happy to be there, too. I was grateful to be there. I had barely gotten this interview because of close family contacts and an ability to write a good email. That is, if you could call a meeting at an abandoned building an interview.

“The boys will be a bit late, they’re on their way back from Bolton.” Charlie said, wrapping a scarf around his neck. He started to lead me towards the building behind him. I frowned to myself. Boys? I followed Charlie through the parking lot to the edge of the building, shoving my hands in my pockets as I went. He’s really casual with his co-workers…

Well that’s a plus, I thought to myself. Charlie got out his keys and unlocked what looked like the side door of the building. The white writing above the tealish-blue door was peeling heavily, revealing old brick below. How old was this building actually? I thought back to the short history I had read on Wikipedia. 1940? Maybe 50. Charlie kicked the blue door in with a loud bang and my thoughts of dates disappeared.

“Sorry, the door freezes shut sometimes.” Charlie led the way into a makeshift front office. It was dark. There were piles of snow in the corners where it had crept through the cracks of the boarded up windows. Charlie asked me if I had brought the waivers. I handed them over, and then moved on to sign the guest book. Just as I finished putting down my email address, the door opened again with a rusty creak. I jumped. Two kids, roughly my age, came bounding through the door, bringing a trail of snow and a howling gust of wind with them.

Their office was strangely warm. It didn’t make any sense. It was about fifteen Fahrenheit outside, and although they said they didn’t have the heat on, I almost didn’t believe them. The window was cracked and I had still stripped off all of my winter layers down to my t-shirt. The blood had rose to the surface of my cheeks, making them rosy; I could feel my ears turning red, too.

My bosses, two boys maybe only a little bit older than me, sat across from me at a long wooden table. Earlier they had told me that they had built the table themselves. I liked them already. Now their noses were in their laptops, their hands blindly feeling around for their mugs of coffee every once in a while, eyes still on the screens in front of them.

One of them looked up, tilting his head to one side. “You want some more?” He had seen me watching him sip his own coffee. I hastily said yes please, not wanting to admit that I had been watching them work, wondering what I should be doing at that time. I pushed a still half-full mug towards him.

We had a meeting earlier. It had mostly consisted of trying to figure out what I would be doing for the semester as their intern. We had straightened a couple of things out. I would be there on Fridays, for example. I would help run social media. I would take pictures of events. All of the work was of that ilk. Just helping out where I could with the things I was good at, or had some experience with.

I had gotten in contact with the boys Tad and Erick, and a couple of their advisors a couple of weeks before about Moran. Somehow I had managed to come out of a tour of the building with an internship. It would become a community hub. I was excited to get involved.

It had been a couple of weeks later since that first meeting and tour of the old coal plant. Now here I was, sitting in their tiny office, just up the creaky stairs above a little shop called Conant Metal and Light. I found it funny that they leased the space above a lamp store but never used the actual lights in their office. An overwhelming amount of midday sun poured in through the window behind me, falling onto my back. Maybe that’s why it was so warm, I thought.

The natural light suited the space. They had painted the walls all white, except the far one from the door. Hand-painted on the far wall was the teal-blue New Moran Plant logo. With an old leather couch in the corner and a few small plants teetering on various surfaces of the room, it had a cozy, homey feel. I was happy to be working here. Being here, in this space, with these people, surrounded by and endless supply of coffee labeled early on as “the good stuff” was bound to be good for me. I was excited for what was to come. I smiled to myself.

Tad turned around in his seat to face me, still steering the Subaru down the road ahead of him. “Snacks?” he asked. I nodded.

“Ya that’s going to need to happen.” Erick responded. He was in the passenger seat, reading emails and texts and dj-ing and looking at the weather for tomorrow all at once. We drove down Pine Street, looking for somewhere to stop. There was a conveniently placed bakery on the left. We pulled in. Inside, we all had thick slices of bread with a healthy serving of Vermont honey and butter spread over the surface. The boys picked up a loaf of bread for home, too.

We got back in the car and Erick got back on his phone. “Chris and Jas are going to meet us back at the office. Beers?” he said, again without looking up. His car time is designated phone time. Tad nodded and turned out of the parking lot and back onto Pine. We pulled out onto the road, which was now busy with 5 o’clock commuters. A little ways down there was a gas station/convenience store. We parked and made our way inside.

“Wait, shit,” Erick stopped in the doorway to the little gas station structure, “are you 21? How old are you?”

“I’m 21, don’t worry,” I said laughing. “Wait, how old did you think I was?” Erick smiled and mumbled something that sounded like 14, and held the door open for Tad and me. In the back of the shop, we found a small selection of brews.

“Slim pickins’” Tad mumbled. They decided on a case of Shed, and paid. We all got back in the car and drove to the office.

Inside, I started to rummage around the strange collection of objects they keep on the windowsill and on top of the fridge, looking for a bottle opener. I couldn’t find one. I turned around to ask where I could find one, but both of them had already opened theirs, and were sipping quietly, checking emails. Erick was humming to himself.

“How…?” I pointed to the bottle. Tad held up a bread knife. They keep a toaster, cutting board, and bread knife in their office, but don’t have a bottle opener. “You opened it with that?” I asked. Tad nodded.

“You try.” Erick said. He showed me how to hold my hand on the bottle, using leverage to pop the cap off. I don’t like knives. I was nervous. I tried a couple times with no success. The third time it worked. The cap popped off and fell on the floor. The boys congratulated me.

“You’re learning so much from your time with us.” Tad said. It was true- I had picked up a strange array of skills since spending time with these two boys. I can write a damn good Facebook post, I can write grants, I can open bottles with a bread knife, and much more.

Chris and Jas appeared through the door, greeting us with more snacks in hand. Jasmine looked down by my side. “Kate, your hands bleeding!” I looked down and low and behold, I had not been as successful as I had liked to think with my bottle opening. A thin stream of red trickled down my knuckle to the tip of my thumb.

“Dang, and you almost had it for a second there” Tad shook his head, handing me a napkin.

I was doing homework at my kitchen table. It was early Sunday morning, so I was surprised when my phone buzzed. The text read: “Erick’s backpack is still in the back of your car.” Whoops. He had left it there after work on Friday, and then didn’t need anything in it on Saturday. So I suppose Sunday had come around and he had finally realized that it was gone.

We arranged to meet at Vergennes Laundry, a little bakery with delicious coffee and French pastries. It wasn’t quite halfway, but it was better than them coming to Middlebury, and it was better than me driving to Burlington. Plus, we all love it there.

I walked into the bakery. They had beaten me there. They sat in the back corner. They had also already finished eating. “Am I that late?” I asked. I handed Erick his backpack and slid into the seat in-between them.

“No, we just eat fast.” Tad explained, smiling, laughing at Erick. “Go get something though, we still have to finish our coffee.” I ordered an Americano and a piece of quiche.

It was Friday. I was supposed to be going home. Technically, work was over. But when I had been invited to after work drinks with the team, I couldn’t say no. We had been sitting there on that little deck outside of a bar in Winooski for a while; it was the first real sunny day this spring. Erick came and sat down. He had just been on the phone. “Kate, do you want the extra ticket?” he asked. They were all headed to a concert in town.

So, I followed them to the concert. It was in the church at the top of Church Street. The sound was beautiful. I still can’t remember the name of the band- some little indie group out of Boston, I think. I didn’t mind. It was the kind of music you enjoy when it’s live and right in front of you but never really bother to go look up later.

After, later, we went out. I liked going out with all of them. It was a nice break from Middlebury. Instead of sweaty college students crammed into an Atwater suite, there was a group of twenty-something’s around a table at a bar, talking about random interesting topics. Later, Erick left to go find other friends at another bar. Chris and Jasmine peeled off. Tad and I decided to go home. It was late, and I decided that the responsible thing to do would be to sleep on their couch instead of get in the car and drive back to Middlebury.

Tad had brought his bike out to the concert with him. He hopped on, and then seemed to realize I had no bike, and that riding alongside wasn’t going to work. “Jump on the handlebars!” He said. “I’ve done this with Erick loads of times.” Throwing caution to the wind, I got on. As we turned the last corner onto their street, I saw a police car.

“Be careful!” The policeman yelled out of his window. Tad panicked, and turned around as we passed the police car, yelling back. The bike went flying. I went flying. Tad landed on the bike, and the bike landed on top of me. And that is how I got my first ever-sprained ankle.

“If you could just sign here, sir, that would be great.” I passed the iPad with the e-waiver to the man in front of me. Everyone going inside the building had to sign it. I handed him a hard hat when he was done. He joined the growing crowd in front of the building, a sea of teal and white hard hats. Guster was about to play a pop-up show in the Moran Plant.

“Excuse me everybody!” Erick yelled over the excited hum of the crowd. Voices quieted. He gave his spiel on the building, and then explained that this was one of many pop-up shows that were to happen over the course of the summer. We led the various guests, a mix of board members, friends, and random Burlington inhabitants and Guster fans into the building.

Guster played for about half an hour. Their music was much better in person than it had been in my car on the drive up from Middlebury. Surprisingly, the acoustics of the Plant had worked out just fine.

We weren’t supposed to, but I climbed up one of the staircases in order to get a better photo of the scene. At the top, I found one of our board members, Kath Montstream. She sat perched behind the railing, legs swinging off of the edge. She turned to face me when I reached the top.

“This is epic.” She said. I wholeheartedly agreed.

We decided to have our weekly design meeting outside. Chris, Jas (our two wonderful designers), Tad, Erick, and me. 2 pots of coffee. 1 picnic table. A whole lot of ideas. We talked about plans for the summer for a while. Then moved on to print design, and Guster concert follow-up. In the middle of the meeting, Tad looked at me, remembering something.

“It’s your birthday, isn’t it?” he asked. My face turned red and I slowly nodded.

“Oh my gosh, happy birthday!” Jasmine exclaimed. Erick and Chris had similar reactions. “How are you celebrating?”

“By going to work,” I laughed. I hadn’t really planned on anything else. 22 didn’t feel all that special.

“Really? Don’t you want to do something with your friends? We had you scheduled for that 5 o’clock dinner, but you should head south whenever you want…” Erick seemed concerned that I wasn’t having enough fun. I explained that it really wasn’t a big deal, and I honestly didn’t really want the attention.

The day went on as per usual. We gave a couple of tours of the building, I transcribed some interviews, and I made a couple social media posts. When 5 o’clock rolled around Tad, Erick, and I headed up to Flatbread to meet a group of young professionals working in various sustainable companies around the United States. We stayed for a while. It was fun to meet other people our age (well, Tad and Erick’s age) doing cool stuff. Eventually we took off, using my birthday as an excuse. The boys had a music festival to get to, or so I thought.

We all jumped into the boys Subaru. I looked down to my phone to check my email. When I looked up again, I realized that we weren’t on Pine Street, let alone going in the right direction of the office, where my car was parked.

“Did you forget something at the Plant?” I asked. We pulled onto the road next to the railroad tracks, the one that leads to Moran. The boys looked at each other.

“Not quite,” one of them said. I tilted my head in confusion. Tad saw me in the rear view mirror. “You’ll see.”

Next thing I know, we’re climbing stairs on the inside of building. When we get to the top, the boys cross over to a grated platform, where I notice a smallish hole in the wall. Erick goes first, through the hole he goes. Tad motions for me to go next. Although in retrospect I probably should have, I don’t question it, and shimmy through the hole, trying not to scratch myself on the edges of the cut metal.

We’re standing on the metal framing that once held large boilers. Rusted and old, but perfectly sturdy, they line the north side of the building. The view of the lake is breathtaking. The sun is on its way to bed for the day, slipping behind the Adirondacks. I walk to the edge to get a better look. The boys join me, one on either side. We stand in silence for a bit, taking it all in.

“Hey,” Tad elbows me “happy birthday, kid.”

“22,” Erick echoes. I thank them.

The sun sets, and we climb down. As excited as I am for the building to be rebuilt, this is how I will always remember it. Rusty, peeling, and bathed in the light of the golden hour, with two of it’s founders remarking on how much they like it just as it is.