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HOME WORK

Oil Tank? More Like a Subterranean Monster

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HOUSES, like people, tend to live double lives. They, too, have a visible existence and an invisible existence, a seen life and an unseen life. In the latter are those hidden systems, the pipes in the walls, the wiring, all that lies concealed between the sheathing and the Sheetrock. At our house, the most ominous of these unseen features is the oil tank buried just out past the porch.

The 500-gallon tank came with the house when we bought it years ago — years, that is, before we knew anything about the toxic hazards of buried tanks, years before the folly of burying fuel was even considered. Today, though, it is common knowledge that such tanks can break down after 20 to 25 years, and if oil leaches out from them and seeps into the groundwater, it will poison the water in your well, contaminate any adjacent wetlands and otherwise degrade the soil around it. Understandably, the fines are heavy. Not to mention the cleanup costs of tearing out the tank and removing all the contaminated dirt around it.

The Web sites that address this catastrophe-in-waiting are going to chill your bones. They did mine. In New York State, if a leak is discovered, you have exactly two hours to report it to the Department of Environmental Conservation. And if the leak is pervasive, and the dirt and groundwater are found to have traces of petroleum, the excavation and cleanup costs can run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. I have heard of dire cases in which those costs equaled and even surpassed the value of the property itself. And forget your homeowners' insurance; most policies have a "pollution exclusion" or something similar.

There are ways to tell if your tank is leaking. A leak toward the top of the tank would allow water seeping in to mix with the fuel oil, wreaking havoc with the furnace. And a leak toward the bottom of the tank would drain out the fuel oil, and you'd be refilling the tank at a steady clip. Neither of these has happened to us. Nonetheless, the tank has become a subversive presence in our domestic life. Sooner or later, any number of things, from condensation inside the tank to the acid in the soil around it, will cause it to rust.

So I think of the tank lying there as my own little [Richard Serra](#) nightmare of corroding steel, streaked, stained, its pattern of industrial decay creating picturesque graffiti across the monster arc of metal. Mr. Serra's monumental steel sculptures explore how a hollow steel form can play with our perceptions; Lynne Cooke, curator of the [Dia Art Foundation](#), wrote of one sculpture's capacity for "tempering routine assumptions regarding the built environment and the spectator's relationship to it."

I no longer need to go to a museum to have such assumptions questioned. I am fully acquainted with the vertigo the hollow steel form can induce. And as far as my relationship to the built environment goes, I have come to understand fully that as our fuel tank gradually self-destructs, it will morph into a subterranean monster capable of destroying the value of our house, the land around it, our life in it.

When exactly this will happen is unclear. I am told that the old tank may have some sticker or label on it that states its gauge of steel — whether it is heavy-duty or double-walled and how long it is likely to last. But you would have to dig the thing up, of course, just to read it, and I realize that little sticker falls into the vast category of information that is vital, but impossible to find; much as you know that the facts have been researched, gathered and explicitly stated, but that you just can't get to them.

While it is certainly possible to rip the thing out of the ground, have it sliced up and carted off for scrap metal, a less invasive procedure calls for abandonment. But unlike other forms of abandonment that involve nothing more than careless neglect, abandoning an oil tank requires a system, a plan and a partnership with the government, not to mention potentially thousands of dollars.

The desertion process begins with the installation of a new fuel tank or two above ground or in the basement, into which the oil from the old tank is siphoned. Whatever sludge remains is emptied into barrels and disposed of in a manner compliant with environmental regulations. Finally, a patch of ground above the old tank is removed, a two- or three-foot section carved out of its top, and the whole thing is hosed, scrubbed, scraped and degreased — not necessarily in that order — then filled with sand or peat gravel. The soil around it is tested for contaminants, and assuming it's clean, you're awarded a certificate.

There are innumerable reasons for the way we arrange and rearrange the places we live, among them a need for order, a desire for beauty, a hope for comfort. But replacing the old oil tank comes from another impulse, which is pure, blind fear — the fear of poisoning our little patch of green, of contaminating groundwater, of devastating wildlife and otherwise visiting ruin on something pristine and good and then depleting all our resources to clean the mess up. But most of all, I suspect the buried oil tank is a reservoir for that primal terror we all have about the things that lie buried.

To call it a fear of the unknown would be putting it lightly. It encompasses all the ambiguity, that deep apprehension of all things that reside underground. It is only as children that we imagine them to be treasures, because most sentient adults have some passing familiarity with the iconic malevolence of those things we try to bury.

And what represents it better than the corroding tank with its toxic load? As I make arrangements to have the thing properly abandoned, I realize it is one of those things you just get rid of without examining too closely. It lies in that catalog of things you do away with without ever knowing exactly how bad they really are. As the agent of a catastrophe that can only be imagined, it makes for one of the occasions in which you have to change what you cannot see, excise what you do not yet know.

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