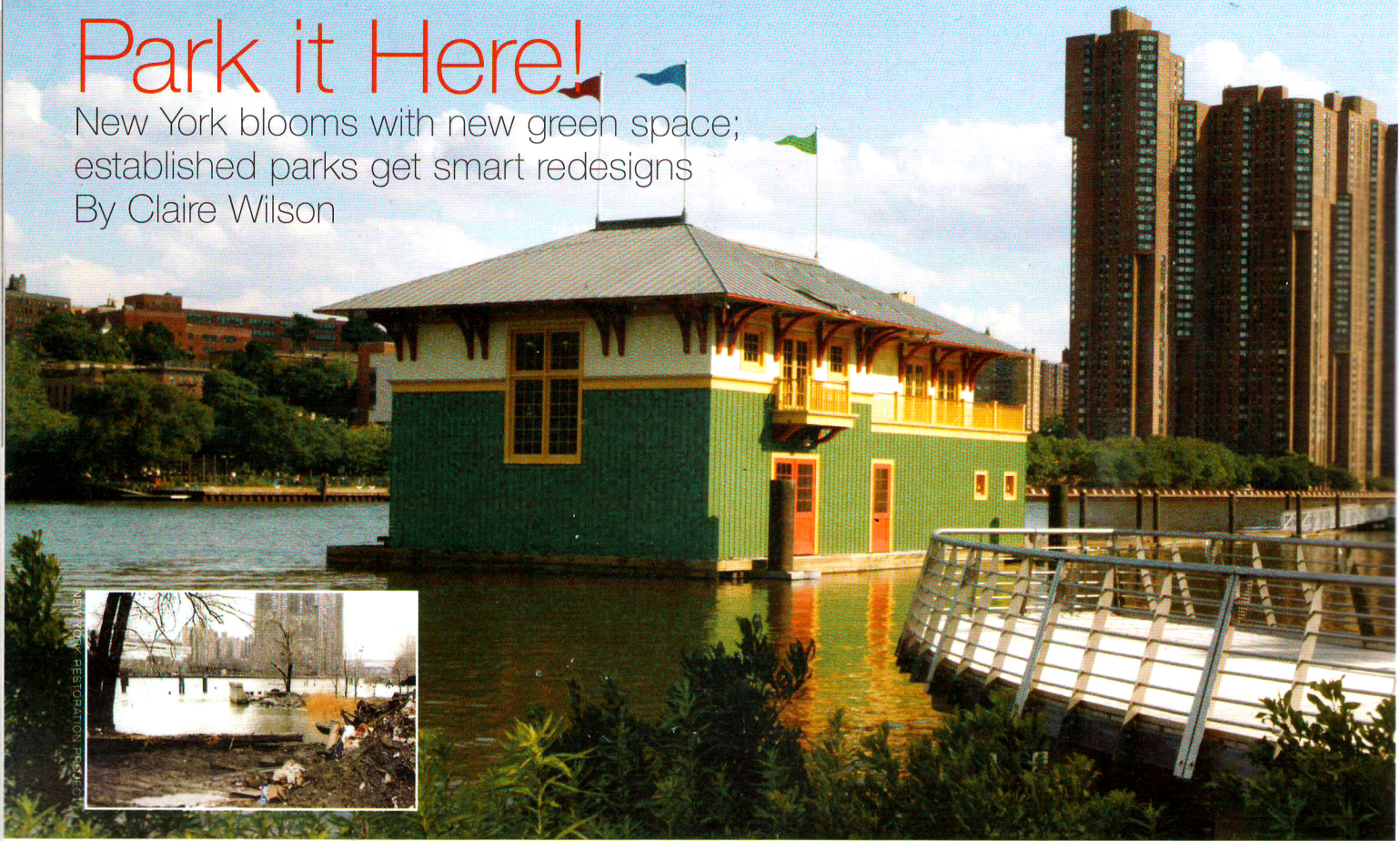


Park it Here!

New York blooms with new green space; established parks get smart redesigns
By Claire Wilson



NEW YORK RESTORATION PROJECT

New York Restoration Project: Swindler Cove Park (before and after), designed by Billie Cohen, includes the Peter Jay Sharp Boathouse, a floating oasis on the Harlem River designed by Robert A.M. Stern Architects

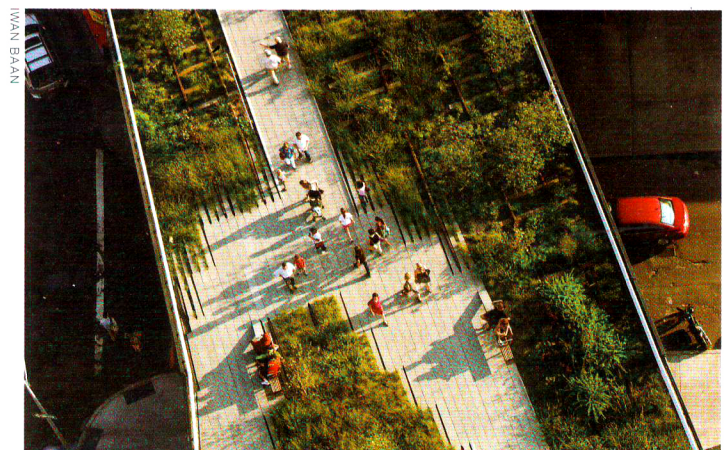
New York City responded to unprecedented growth in the 19th century by setting aside large swaths of green space and turning them into public parks. It mandated the creation of Central Park, Prospect Park, Van Cortlandt Park, Pelham Bay Park, Riverside Park, and Union Square, to name a few, all within decades of each other, to serve the growing population and patterns of urban sprawl.

The city is experiencing another such boom. Not since the original parks were opened has New York seen so much new public space, much of it on the waterfront, or such intelligent refurbishment of established parks that welcome new amenities and serve a shifting population in new ways.

New projects include the High Line (James Corner Field Operations and Diller Scofidio + Renfro); Hudson River Park (multiple firms); Brooklyn Bridge Park (Michael Van Valkenburgh and Associates – see pg. 13; Governors Island (West 8/Rogers Marvel Architects/Diller Scofidio+Renfro/Mathews Nielsen Landscape Architects/Urban Design+); Swindler Cove Park (Billie Cohen); and a pedestrian zone in Times Square (Snøhetta with WXY architecture + urban design and Mathews Nielsen Landscape Architects, among others). Ferry Point Park and Ferry Point Waterfront Park (Thomas Balsley Associates) are taking shape in the Bronx, and on Staten Island, Freshkills Park (James Corner Field Operations), at 2,200 acres, will be the largest park to open in the city in more than a century. Its refurbishment now complete, Union Square will no doubt take a page from the playbook of the successfully revitalized Bryant Park or even Central Park, which was

the first green space to lead the charge out of the rampant decay that ravaged so many city parks for decades.

If the notion of improved public space is now the darling of government, city planners, and the people who use it, observers say it is because sweeping changes in the social landscape over the past two decades have demanded it. According to Guy Nordenson of Guy Nordenson and Associates, New York has become a family town again. “A lot of people are staying here who might have otherwise moved to the suburbs,” he says. “The demands on schools and parks are a consequence of that demographic.” For example, Brooklyn Bridge Park “is part of Brooklyn’s emergence over the last 20-odd years as an alternative cultural center,” Nordenson says.



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James Corner Field Operations and Diller Scofidio + Renfro: Aerial view of the High Line's Washington Grasslands over Little West 12th Street

The East River Waterfront Esplanade, designed by SHoP Architects (with Ken Smith Landscape Architects, a joint venture of HDR and Arup, and Tillotson Design) and currently under construction, is the Financial District's way of serving more tourists and workers in what is the fourth largest central business district in the nation, and a huge swell in the residential population below Chambers Street. According to Nicole LoRusso, senior vice president for planning and economic development for the Alliance for Downtown New York, 23,000 people lived in the area on September 10, 2001; nine years later they number 50,000.

Two other public spaces downtown, Water Street and Greenwich South, are being considered for sprucing up in the hopes of attracting more street life. For Water Street, a study done in conjunction with Starr Whitehouse Landscape Architects and Planners and FXFOWLE Architects proposes

trees, medians, and reconfigured retail along a stretch that currently lacks any dynamism despite the 70,000 people who work there. For Greenwich South, a small area near the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel at the foot of Trinity Place, plans include better seating

and shade. "People want vitality; they want to be someplace that makes them think something exciting is going on," says LoRusso. "It's a challenge down here because of the way the spaces are configured."

If many of the exciting new public parks are on the water, it's likely because New York City already owned the property and could develop it as it saw fit. The city did not have to raze any occupied structures or resort to eminent domain. Being unsuited for residential development during the real-estate boom was perhaps further impetus to earmark waterside parcels for public use.

Besides beautification and public demand, quality-of-life concerns are having a major impact on new public spaces. These areas are a habitat for trees, and more trees mean cleaner air and a healthier population. According to Amy Gavaris, executive vice president of the New York Restoration Project (NYRP), founded 15 years ago by entertainer Bette Midler, studies have shown there is a direct correlation between fewer trees in a neighborhood and a higher incidence of diabetes, asthma, and obesity among residents.

NYRP works with the Department of Parks on the MillionTreesNYC program, on which Billie Cohen collaborates. NYRP and Cohen are involved in the creation of the Sherman Creek Campus on the Harlem River in Washington Heights; Swindler Cove Park, also a Cohen design, is part of this. This area has grown from five to 15 acres since 2003, and will eventually stretch from 201st to 163rd Street. The organization also owns more than 50 community gardens around the city, having saved them from being auctioned off by the city for development.



Starr Whitehouse Landscape Architects and Planners and FXFOWLE Architects: A proposal for a portion of Water Street includes trees, seating, medians, and reconfigured retail

Things like community gardens, the Greenstreets program (designed to place landscaping in small pockets around the city), and miles of new dedicated bicycle lanes by the Department of Transportation all come together in a big way to help improve quality of life. "These eventually add up in terms of air quality and safety," says Adam Yarinsky, FAIA, principal in Architecture Research Office (ARO), which restored the Neoclassical pavilion at the north side of Union Square and designed the new comfort station.

Many people credit the Bloomberg Administration for getting behind the improvement of public space and greening initiatives. According to Nordenson, nothing happens without popular pressure to advance it, but nothing will happen without a framework of support, either. "This administration is more in touch with that than previous administrations, which have worked mostly from the bottom up," he says.

Along with ARO and Catherine Seavitt Studio, Nordenson co-authored the study, "On the Water: Palisade Bay," which examined how rising sea levels will impact the city, and was the subject of the recent exhibition "Rising Currents: Projects for New York's Waterfront" at the Museum of Modern Art. Nordenson was delighted by the positive reaction his ideas have been getting from people in the administration. "I'm surprised there is so much support from the Department of City Planning, which is trying to find ways of talking about the study with different agencies," he says.



Guy Nordenson and Associates/Catherine Seavitt Studio/Architecture Research Office: Proposed wetlands along the Staten Island coastline in Palisade Bay, part of "On the Water: Palisade Bay" – a study examining how rising sea levels will impact the city

Gregg Pasquarelli, AIA, principal in SHoP Architects, which is redesigning the East River Esplanade, also credits the Bloomberg Administration with allowing so much to flower in public spaces. "It's a smart thing for cities to invest in their public spaces to increase the quality of life for the people who live and work here," he says, "and to encourage private investment around those public spaces."

For NYRP's Gavaris, successful efforts to contain sprawl and minimize climate change have an effect that go far beyond the city limits. "We need to take a new look at what livability means," she says, "and make cities more livable so we can conserve more of our exurban spaces, wilderness, and farmland."

Claire Wilson writes for the *New York Times*.