THE THIN GREEN LINE

PARKS ALONG NEW YORK CITY’S VULNERABLE WATERFRONT, LIKE THE ONE RECENTLY COMPLETED AT HUNTER’S POINT SOUTH, ARE BOTH AMENITY AND ARMOR.

BY JONATHAN LERNER

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VEN AS THE TIDES lapping at its edges rise, New York City is turning eagerly toward the water to relieve both a congested transit system and a shortfall in housing stock. For example, you can now travel among all five boroughs by ferry. Ferries have several advantages over streets and subways. For the passenger, those include wind in your hair and magnificent, alternately thrilling and calming views of the harbor; for the city, minimal fixed infrastructure and the ability to easily alter routes if circumstances—such as the shorelines themselves—should change. And from the new ferries that ply the East River, you can see the city’s most visible effort to address the housing crunch: clusters of enormous apartment towers recently built and under construction along once-industrial waterfronts.

The city mandates that, with redevelopment, the water’s edge be public space. Some of that is the “waterfront public access area” each newly developed riverside property is required to provide. Those areas must at least have landscape and seating; as built, they vary from quite thoughtful to afterthought. There are also a number of city and...
State parks along the river. So there is beginning to be a continuous public edge. It will probably always have gaps, but they are filling in as the new housing developments rise. Viewed from out on the water, the chain of public spaces resolves into a thin green line, as much of it consists of esplanades and piers or is otherwise flat. Still, discontinuous and varying in design quality as its component pieces are, they are hugely popular—just because they exist, and also because some of them are truly inspired. That would describe one of the newest of the city-developed pieces. In its case, you do begin to glimpse its features from the river, because it has hills and an architectural overlook jutting up and out toward you. This is, in fact, just where the ferry stops in Long Island City. Queens: Hunter’s Point South Park, designed by Thomas Balsley, FASLA, (whose eponymous firm joined SWA in 2016) in collaboration with Weiss/Manfredi Architecture/Landscape/Urbanism.

Hunter’s Point South is a massive, still unfinished redevelopment project going up where Newtown Creek, which divides Brooklyn from Queens, flows into the East River. It will eventually have some 5,000 residential units, up to 100,000 square feet of commercial and community space, and several new schools. To its north, Hunter’s Point South seamlessly adjoins an earlier, similarly scaled high-rise redevelopment called Queens West. The original open-space master plan and schematic design for both, when they were considered a single project area, was done in 1993 by Balsley with Weintraub & di Domenico Architects. Balsley then designed the first park component, Gantry Plaza State Park, which was completed in 1998. When work moved ahead on the Hunter’s Point South section, he and Weiss/Manfredi created its open-space master plan, which is notable for its green street infrastructure, and planned its 11-acre waterfront park. The park’s first phase opened in 2013, and it won an ASLA Professional Honor.
Award in 2014 (see “The Amphibious Edge,” LAM, February 2014). The five-acre second and final phase was completed in 2018, and also won an ASLA Professional Honor Award last year. It seamlessly connects to Gantry Plaza State Park, which in turn merges into waterfront space provided by developers. This continuous ensemble, varying in width up to about 350 feet, now comprises roughly a mile and a quarter of uninterrupted, designed riverfront.

Two conditions distinguish Hunter’s Point South Park from other East River-fronting public spaces. Often their upland borders are fences demarcating the private outdoor areas of apartment buildings. But here, a new boulevard separates the park from the new buildings; that unmistakably declares this stretch of riverfront community property. And, during the industrial era, at most other places the shoreline was hardened and more or less straightened with seawalls and piers. This parcel, though, says Weiss/Manfredi co-principal Marion Weiss, Affiliate ASLA, “had this crazy irregular edge. And it had the highest topography in the area.” That was two large mounds, located in the second phase section, composed of material excavated in the 1930s for construction of the Queens Midtown Tunnel. The designers considered these inherited features to be gifts, and though not naturally occurring, they had a strong naturalistic influence on the park, suggesting its language of ovals, spirals, and curves, as well as the second phase’s most significant moves: a re-created margin of tidal marsh; an island and a promontory, sculpted from those two borrow piles; and, reiterating the value of elevation, that jutting overlook.

The park’s first phase was built on an area that was flat. It includes a dog park, a playground, an athletic field, a pavilion with a snack bar and tables, a sandy faux beach—which doesn’t actually touch the water—and the ferry landing. These accommodate active pastimes and events that tend to bring people together—team sports, yoga, dances, concerts. The second phase is oriented more toward individuals and small groups, and is more conducive to the tranquil. Balsley says, “That topography allowed us to balance the active and passive uses. There could have been someone saying, ‘Why can’t you get one more playing field here?’ It was our greatest ally.” People certainly engage in serious exercise in the second phase spaces, jogging on the paths, using the installed outdoor fitness equipment, or, as observed one weekday noon last summer, practicing jujitsu on an empty stretch of walkway. But the real motive of the second phase’s design is to elicit contemplation and exploration of both the riverine site and the cityscape it presents so gorgeously. This is achieved because the topography enables two distinct experiences of the water: distance, by bringing you up for panoramas across it; and proximity, by inviting descent almost to where you touch it.

Early maps show most of Hunter’s Point and both shores of Newtown Creek as marsh. The East River is actually a tidal strait connecting Long Island Sound with New York Harbor, both being arms of the ocean. “Industrial filling narrowed the channel, creating very strong currents,” Balsley explains. One of the designers’ goals was to make the park capable of absorbing and releasing high water. So those inherited twists and coves of shoreline were reestablished as marsh, protected from scouring...
by a revetment. “But we didn’t want it to look engineered,” he says. Instead, it has a narrow trail on top, and is planted both with grasses and clumps of trees on the river side, and on the backside as “a green bowl” that fills and empties with the tides twice a day. “We’ve blurred this edge. You’re not that aware of the armament” when walking along the revetment.

Actually, there is a series of bowls. One of them repeatedly transforms the lower of the two former borrow piles, which is about 15 feet high and at the river’s edge, into a land-tied island. New York may not nominally be part of New England, but the northeast Atlantic coastal geography is continuous. “Anybody familiar with the New England shoreline will recognize the way tidal marshes create temporary islands,” Balsley says. Here, the marsh areas were made with channels between the culverts that fill them; these facilitate flow and increase capacity. They also add a touch of verisimilitude. Balsley points out that historically, when salt hay was harvested in the region, both natural tidal creeks and human-made channels, still visible in many places, were the means to transport it. At several places, short flights of concrete steps lead right down into the little marshes. They’re for maintenance, not for parkgoers’ use, and it’s not even clear how to reach them, but they make the tantalizing suggestion that you could step down right into the grasses and mud—to go clamming, maybe.

“[INHERITED] TOPOGRAPHY ALLOWED US TO BALANCE THE ACTIVE AND PASSIVE USES. IT WAS OUR GREATEST ALLY.”

—THOMAS BALSLEY, FASLA

ABOVE
People enjoying the park’s lawns and groves will likely be unaware of the layers of historic shoreline and geology and the complex infrastructure beneath their feet.

OPPOSITE
A riprap revetment, deliberately carved tidal channels, and salt-tolerant native plantings reestablish the “boulds” of tidal march.
PHASE II
PLANT LIST

TREES
- Acer rubrum (Red maple)
- Amelanchier canadensis (Canadian serviceberry)
- Betula populifolia (Gray birch)
- Carya ovata (Shagbark hickory)
- Celtis occidentalis (American hackberry)
- Ceratonia siliqua (European carob)
- Gleditsia triacanthos var. inermis ‘Halia’ (Narrow honey locust)
- Juniperus virginiana (Eastern red cedar)
- Liquidambar styraciflua ‘Word’ (Checker tree gum)
- Liquidambar styraciflua ‘Worplesdon’ (Waterfront sweet gum)
- Magnolia x ‘Jane’ (Jane magnolia)
- Magnolia x soulangiana (Saucer magnolia)
- Myrtus communis (Black gum)
- Phusia nigra (Austrian pine)
- Pinus strobus (Eastern white pine)
- Prunus x yezoensis ‘Akebono’ (Akebono Yoshino cherry)
- Quercus alba (Shawnee white oak)
- Quercus cococce (Scarlet oak)
- Quercus phellos (Willow oak)
- Quercus rubra (Red oak)
- Salix babylonica (Weeping willow)
- Zelkova serrata (Japanese zelkova)

SHRUBS
- Cornus sericea ‘Kelseyi’ (Kelsey’s dwarf red osier dogwood)
- Forsythia ‘Arnold Dwarf’ (Arnold Dwarf forsythia)
- Fothergilla major ‘Mount Airy’ (Mount Airy fothergilla)
- Hibiscus moscheutos (Crimsoneyed rose mallow)
- Iris versicolor (Harlequin blue flag)
- Juncus effusus (Common rush)
- Ligustrum x vicaryi ‘Manchot’ (May night sage)
- Salix x yuluviana ‘Mammoth’ (Big leaf willow)
- Symphyotrichum novi-belgii ‘Purple Dome’ (Purple Dome New York aster)
- Symphyotrichum novae-angliae ‘Purple Dome’ (Purple Dome New York aster)
- Veronicastrum virginicum (Culver’s root)

GRASSES
- Calamagrostis x acutiflora ‘Karl Foerster’ (Karl Foerster feather reed grass)
- Carex appalachica (Appalachian sedge)
- Carex pensylvanica (Pennsylvania sedge)
- Panicum virgatum ‘Shenandoah’ (Shenandoah switchgrass)
- Pennisetum alopecuroides ‘Hameln’ (Dwarf fountain grass)
- Schizachyrium scoparium ‘The Blues’ (The Blues little bluestem)
- Sporobolus cryptandrus ‘The Blues’ (The Blues little bluestem)

VINES
- Parthenocissus quinquefolia (Virginia creeper)

OPPOSITE
At high tide, the lower mound becomes an island reached only by a footbridge.

BELOW
The skyline of Midtown Manhattan across the river is a constant presence.
The pathways generally scale down both from boulevard to river and from higher to lower elevation. Where each street of the new neighborhood dead-ends at the park is an “entrance foyer,” a plaza with benches. “Not everybody necessarily wants to go to the water. Some just want to sit and watch,” Balsley says. A main walkway runs the length of the park, curving both north into the first phase and south where it skirts the promontory—the larger of the two hills, which rises to 35 feet—before bending east along Newtown Creek. It is 12 feet wide. At several points, narrow spurs peel off and lead down to the four-foot-wide revetment path. “That’s quite a bit narrower than you would normally see in a park,” Weiss points out. And “with the grasses growing over the edges, it gives the sense of a trail as opposed to a sidewalk.” When the tide is high, “you feel you’re walking on water.”

In plan, the revetment departs from the sinuous line dominant in the rest of the park. It’s a zigzag, reminiscent of a fortified medieval town or a Revolutionary War star fort. The shape is indeed a barrier, to the erosive power of the river. The structure “can be entirely flooded and impassable in storms, or traversed even at very high tides,” Balsley explains. Some of its turnings are furnished with low, blocky seating walls of Jet Mist granite, like battlements. These are polished on top and facing the path, but muscledly, and metaphorically, rough toward the tides. And the revetment’s form has another function: “Contrary to the arching PENINSULA CURVED WALL/CURB

ABOVE
The curb on the island gently rises to become a seating wall.

OPPOSITE
The seven glowing domes of the artist Nobuho Nagasawa’s Luminescence depict the phases of the moon.
paths that encourage movement, the trail experience was conceived as a stroll, with angled geometry to slow the pace and to stage shifting perspectives,” he says. The succession of different orientations and views it gives, the decelerated pace it encourages, and the sense of separation from solid land it induces all create a sensation of being an individual in a very great space, and an illusion of separation from the city while remaining surrounded by it—just like the best moments aboard the ferry.

The revetment’s path and seating spots are not the only opportunity the park builds in for experiencing the duality of intimacy and immensity, or that of privacy in a public place. Half a dozen “family rafts”—wooden platforms just large enough for a couple of grown-ups and a couple of kids to lounge on—are scattered, as if afloat, on the promontory’s grassy incline. Where a path traces the bottom of a slope along the Newtown Creek shore, there’s a series of little spaces curling off, like alcoves, partly hidden by vegetation. Each ends in a bench backed up against the hill, both secluded and secure, which Weiss describes as being “for the more romantic pairs.” Then, just in case all this gentleness starts to dull your senses, there is the overlook. It breaks the decreasing hierarchy of pathway scales by expanding as it thrusts out over the river to a width of 39 feet. And it counters the park’s organic quality with a powerfully engineered structure. Describing the technical and craft challenges of fabricating and installing it, Weiss tosses off...
The overlook contrasts with and emphasizes the overall naturalism of the park’s design, and supports the impression that it is a topography that has always been here and always will be. This park can take inundation. Buildings at Hunter’s Point South incorporate the requirements of post-Hurricane Sandy code revisions for flood resilience, like all new waterfront construction in the city. Still, New York’s fevered embrace of new housing on vulnerable edges can seem like a love affair with somebody whose disastrous relationship history is already well known. Why do people want to live in such places? “I find that to be an incredibly naive line of questioning,” says the architect and planner Thad Pawlowski, a codirector of Columbia University’s Center for Resilient Cities and Landscapes and an expert on urban climate hazards, “as if human development were some kind of spigot you could turn on and off. People are attracted to water. It’s the briny stuff of life. If you live by the water, you have a relationship with natural cycles,” which can be deepened, subtly or even explicitly, by experiencing parks like this one. “That’s intrinsic to our ability as a species to adapt, which we must do now.”

Balsley looks ahead with the expectation that the neighborhood’s streets will eventually be underwater. Pawlowski points out that “buildings adapt over time,” and that when the streets “become more aqueous, it’s a great opportunity for designers” to make public space that might improve on the “sad expanses of wall” that much of what’s gone up so far in Hunter’s Point unfortunately presents at street level. Balsley says that for building new

**SWIVEL LOUNGE CHAIR**

**TIMBER PLATFORM**
parks, the waterfront “in densely built urban areas is the last frontier. The rising ocean part of it? I can’t get paralyzed. I don’t want it to be so engineered to where it has gone beyond the sweet spot of being a real amenity versus flood control. More important,” he asks, “is who is it that can bring everybody together into a unified approach” to the dangers of climate change?

JONATHAN LERNER LIVES IN A HUDSON RIVER TOWN THAT IS GRAPPLING WITH THE IMPLICATIONS OF EVER-HIGHER TIDES.

Project Credits

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LEFT Lighting in the park’s second phase is indirect, to not interfere with evening vistas.

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