

# TREASURE ISLAND

DESPITE ITS LOCATION AT THE CENTER OF NEW YORK, FEW PEOPLE HAVE EVER SET FOOT ON THE JEWEL SITE WHERE WEST 8 IS MAKING A PARK.

BY JONATHAN LERNER

New York's harbor—formally, Upper New York Bay—is remarkably beautiful, with its expanses of water and sky, oceanic light, and salt breeze. It's also dazzlingly kinetic, alive with ferries and barges, freighters and cruise ships and pleasure boats. The air constantly pulses with the whup-whup of helicopters; higher up, more muted, jets streak toward the airports. Endless vehicular traffic rumbles on the bridges and shoreline highways. Even the built backdrops—industrial docklands and residential buildings on the Brooklyn, Staten Island, and New Jersey waterfronts, and the soaring concretized wealth of Lower Manhattan—seem poised for motion. Adriaan Geuze, International ASLA, a founding principal of West 8 Urban Design & Landscape Architecture, says that because these vistas have so saturated mass media, they are “a collective memory of the world.” Now West 8 has designed a new park that floats, as it were, in the midst of all this; its first phase has opened, and the final one will be completed by next summer. The location is a place that, since colonial days, has mostly been inaccessible to the public, though it's just 800 yards off Manhattan's southern tip: Governors Island.

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When West 8 won a 2007 competition to design the park, Governors Island had a split personality. The island, in its original form, was a 69-acre, roughly circular granite outcrop of gently rolling topography. In 1912, a long, flat, triangular extension of 103 acres was added. Built largely of fill excavated during construction of the Lexington Avenue subway line, the extension points southwest across the bay. These two precincts, the original and the addition, had distinct characters not only physically but culturally. The island had been a military post, beginning in 1776 when American rebels erected breastworks there as protection from British ships anchored in the harbor. The original part of the island now has the patina of a leafy New England college campus. It contains two 1812-era forts and many other structures built in the 19th and early 20th centuries: barracks, arsenal, hospital, and office buildings; dignified rows of officers' houses facing shady greens and parade grounds; and additional facilities such as churches and social clubs that served the 3,500 people who lived on the island and the many more who commuted to work there before it was decommissioned in 1995. The his-

toric district's finale is the enormous Liggett Hall, built in 1929, a U-shaped neo-Georgian structure designed by McKim, Mead & White. The building stretches for 400 yards, with a dramatic three-story archway at its center. It's nearly the width of the island, and effectively separates the historic part from the landfill extension. Beyond Liggett Hall, the elegance disappeared. This newer part of the island presented a bland vista of parking lots and forgettable utilitarian and residential buildings. Although the new park incorporates some of the historic section's open areas, these were already so parklike that they called for little design intervention. It was beyond Liggett Hall that West 8 found its challenge and opportunity.

On his first site visit, Geuze thought, "Holy shit, this is not good! The tip of the island is so flat and shallow and close to the water. You cannot



© PETER MALJES/ESTO, TOP; TIMOTHY SCHENCK, BOTTOM



**ABOVE**  
Liggett Terrace was inspired by European city parks.

**OPPOSITE TOP**  
An information plaza greets passengers coming off the Manhattan ferry.

**OPPOSITE INSET**  
The tall arch at the center of Liggett Hall is a portal to the new park.

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make a park over here; the groundwater must be brackish." But he was knocked out by the harbor panoramas. "If you have views that magnificent, the design is less relevant," he says now. "This may be undermining our profession, but if you are on a site like this, you should not think lightly about the responsibility you have to keep the splendor in the horizon and not in your program. You have to serve rather than to rule."

It didn't take long for the design team to settle on a central device for transforming the landfill into a park: topography. Functionally, lifting the grade would protect the park from seawater inundation and allow a healthy soil biotope to support long-lived vegetation. Aesthetically, sculpting and contouring a new surface, Geuze says, would create a sense of place. "Slopes that face the sun, intimacy, windblown edges. Height differences so you can be either a spectator or on show." The first, already completed phase of the new park begins at Liggett Hall. Its two wings project southwest

toward the new part of the island, defining a space, formerly a parking lot, now transformed into an urbane terrace. This phase continues on to encompass gardens, groves, and lawns, in which the newly created topography is subtle in its dips and swells. But farther along, in the second phase, there will be four new hills. Built partly from the rubble of buildings demolished on the site, their contours and programs will differ. So will their heights, from 25 to 80 feet. The tallest hill will give spectators unobstructed 360-degree views; this vertical gesture is also a response to the "cliffs of Manhattan," as Geuze calls that compelling cityscape to the north. "We sculpted topography a little bit more dramatically than the 19th-century Olmstedians would have done," he says with mild understatement, but adds that sculpting topography in parks "is not a novelty."

Many elements of the West 8 plan reference Olmsted, but in other ways Governors Island is *sui generis*. First, you can only reach the park by ferry,

## PLAN

- 1 SOISSONS LANDING
- 2 GOVERNORS ISLAND NATIONAL MONUMENT (INSIDE DOTTED LINE)
- 3 HISTORIC DISTRICT
- 4 LIGGETT TERRACE
- 5 HAMMOCK GROVE
- 6 PLAY LAWN
- 7 THE HILLS
- 8 LIBERTY TERRACE
- 9 SOUTH PROW
- 10 THE GREAT PROMENADE
- 11 DEVELOPMENT ZONE



from Manhattan or Brooklyn. The trip from Lower Manhattan only takes 10 minutes, but it's still a voyage over water—announced by a blast from the ship's horn—to a place that feels discrete and disconnected. Nobody lives alongside this park, or steps in briefly to walk the dog, or strides across on a daily commute. Aside from a few service vehicles, there are no longer any cars on the island. Former roads now serve simply as broad promenades. The departure from the city's bustle, the journey by boat, the absence of traffic, the resulting sense of insulation—you're still surrounded by New York, but removed and protected. One of the explicit requests in the design RFQ was that the park should “inspire people to make a visit of two and a half hours or more.” Governors Island is not a place you decide to visit casually, but it is a place where you are free—almost impelled—to behave casually. These unique island conditions make it feel that the whole place is yours to explore.

The ferry from Manhattan docks at the island's north end. To reach the new park areas on the

landfill, you could follow the shoreline promenade and take in harbor views all the way. But there is another more dramatic sequence. Amble through the historic district, savoring its air of maturity and tradition. Eventually the long symmetrical facade of Liggett Hall fills your view. That tall archway at its center beckons. Stepping through, Jamie Maslyn Larson, ASLA, the principal in charge of West 8's U.S. projects, likes to murmur, “Here we are leaving Kansas behind and entering Oz.”

On the other side, you find yourself in the space defined by the building's wide U, now called Liggett Terrace, which has been designed and programmed in the spirit of a European urban plaza. There are food carts and lightweight movable tables and chairs set out on sweeps of gravel. Low fountains that invite a barefoot splash and low-hedged planting beds all have curling petal shapes, in contrast to the crisp formality of the big building. These petals point toward and then define paths that lead past play structures

**OPPOSITE TOP**  
“Bike boulevards” are meant to be shared with pedestrians.

**OPPOSITE INSET**  
“If we are with 10, we organize our own 10 seats,” Adriaan Geuze says.

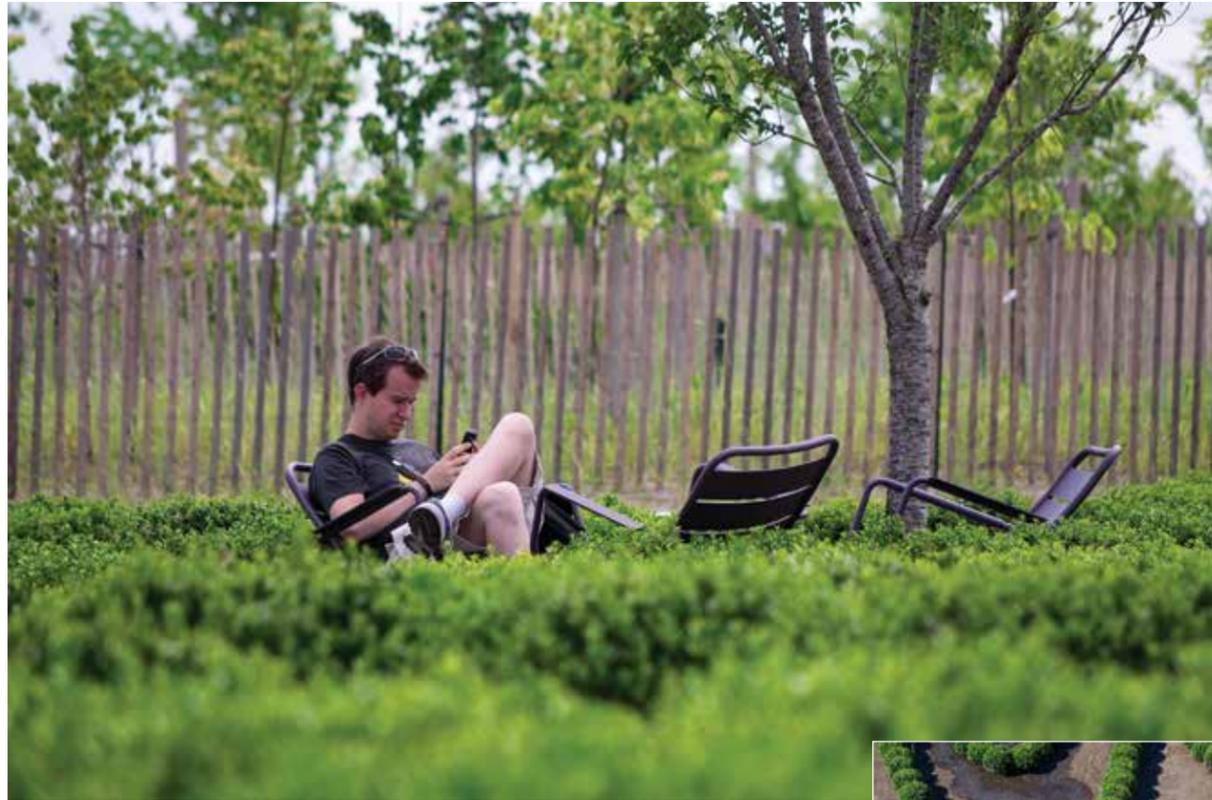


ELIZABETH FELICELLA, TOP; TIMOTHY SCHENCK, BOTTOM

and intimate, room-like clusters of Adirondack chairs and hammocks, into the gently rolling new topography. Liggett Terrace is in many ways the new heart of Governors Island. It sits roughly at the island's geographic center and accommodates many kinds of uses—active and lazy, solitary and shared. The embrace of the building, the southwestern orientation, and the swell of topography beyond protect it from the wind and extend its usability into cooler seasons. Designing the hedge gardens was a “breakthrough,” Maslyn says, “a classic garden treatment, but we've organized them so they're kind of a maze as well. Kids go insane here. They get it immediately.” The hammocks and chair groupings were meant as “pockets where parents could hang out.” It turns out, though, starved perhaps for personal space even if it's temporary, that “New Yorkers will park themselves for hours.” Then again, this is a destination park, so much

so that it would help for people to have a way to tell when the hammocks are unoccupied. “We need an app,” Maslyn jokes.

Liggett Terrace has visual enclosure; it is one place on the island from which it is actually impossible to see the water. It also acts as a zone of transition, from the older, built, more urban part into the newly naturalized parkland. The paths curving up and away toward the south are a promise; under marine skies, passing through areas of vegetation that are, for the time being at least, scrubby and low, they feel like sand trails through dunes toward an as-yet unseen ocean. This is “the classic conceal-and-reveal, pulled from the great examples of our forefathers,” says Maslyn. Paths throughout the new park are lined with white precast concrete edging “meant to accentuate the topography and lure you.” Some of the edging is flush, some raised for seating, all of it impressed with a raised patterning of swirling ovoid shapes that suggests waves or bubbles. “Normally you'd have a steel edger,” Maslyn says. Instead West 8 made something “that you have to have into something that is an expression.”



Strolling south, you pass through an infant forest called Hammock Grove, for its clearings furnished with hammocks. For now, it's low and dense, and will remain off-limits for several years as it grows. Kim Mathews, ASLA, a principal of Mathews Nielsen Landscape Architects, the associate firm that did the planting plans, says, "We wanted from day one to have a mixture of sizes of trees, so we have bare-root trees that started out quite large, and also introduced thousands of seedlings, *Alnus* and tulip poplar, as a protective strategy along the ground plane" to put nitrogen into the soil and stabilize it. A meadow seed mixture was also spread "because right now the landscape is young and really sunny." The goal, perhaps 10 years out, is something different. "There'll be a lot of clearing of the smaller trees; the larger trees will take over and become a canopy layer, and the ground plane will be managed as a forest floor," she explains. "They'll mow it so it stays a walkable, accessible area." It's not immediately obvious yet, but these trees were placed in rows aligned to give repeating, strobe-like glimpses, as you walk past, of

the Statue of Liberty. On emerging from the grove, you see a wide play lawn—and a stunning full view: the statue, the copper-domed towers of Ellis Island, the bay.

Beyond the lawn and still under construction are the four hills. Grassy Hill, the lowest, will have gentle slopes and lawns. Slide Hill, next highest, will be steep and fitted with slides for kids and grown-ups. The experience of Discovery Hill is meant to resemble a mountain hike, while Outlook Hill, the highest, will have vistas in every direction. Pathways will wind among the hills, with consequent closing and opening of views. "You think you're walking out toward the Verrazano Bridge, and then suddenly you face the statue," says Geuze. "The notion that topography is manipulating the view lines to benefit exploration of the horizon was very sharp on our radar."



**ABOVE**  
Informally placed hammocks have been a hit.

**OPPOSITE TOP**  
Movable furniture lets users make their own space.

**OPPOSITE INSET**  
Mazelike hedge gardens are designed to be explored.

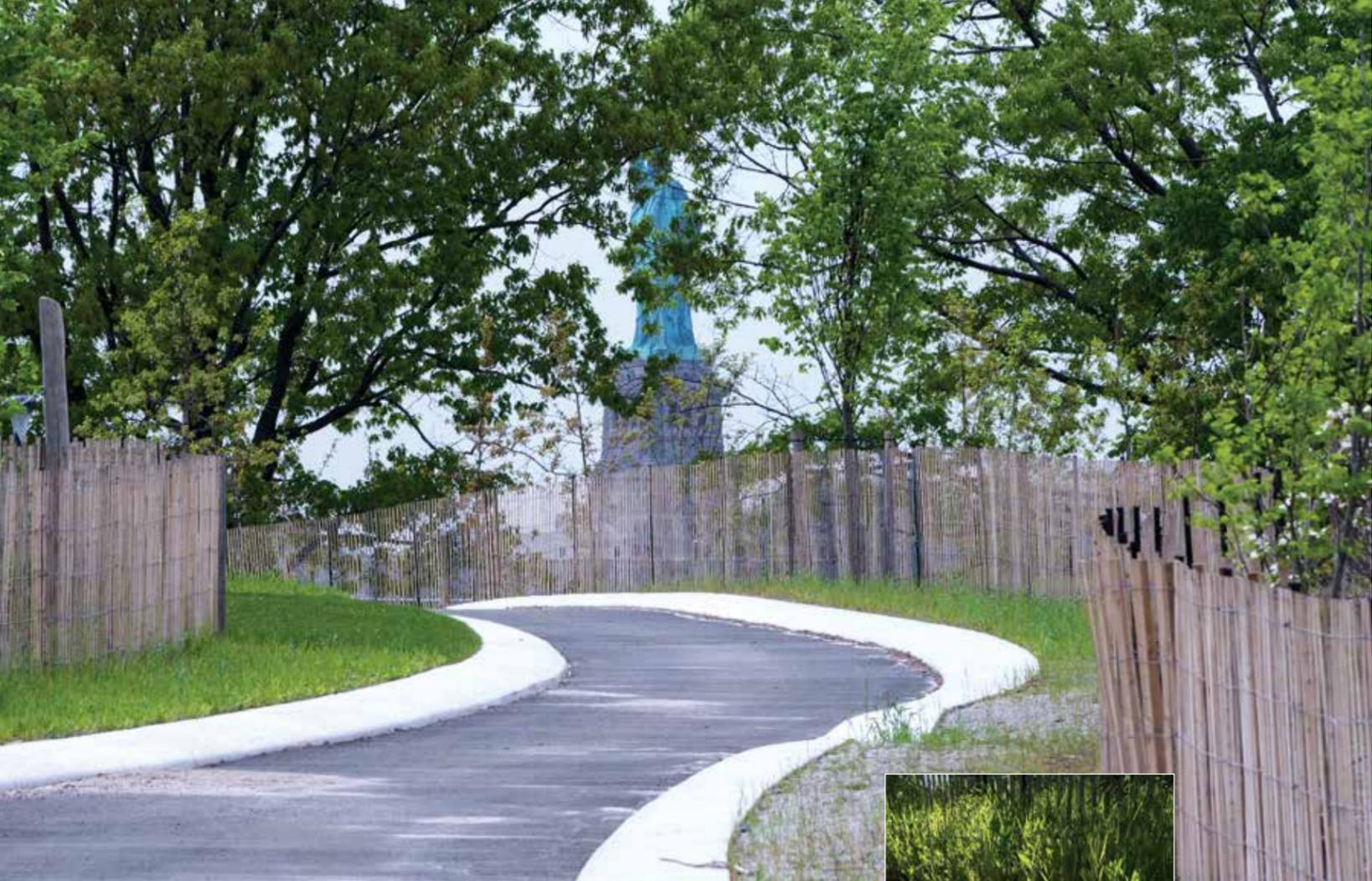
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Engineering the hills—"an artificial landscape on an artificial landscape"—was a tough challenge, Maslyn explains. "The issue wasn't how to build them so you could retain the soil and make sure contractors weren't hurt during construction from slumping. The issue became about global stability" of the site. Might the hills' weight cause not only failure of the seawall but also of the underlying fill? Worst-case scenario: "The 90 feet of material before you hit bedrock would push way out into the harbor." Early ideas were to build a massive foundation anchored to bedrock. "There's a lot you could put into it in terms of infrastructure," Maslyn says. But "we needed to respond with a landscape solution, not a building solution. We wanted to use conventional materials and conventional construction protocols. But we also wanted to build the tallest, coolest hills in the smallest footprint we could."

Where slopes are shallow, they're constructed of building debris covered with topsoil and erosion-

control fabric—standard practice. For steeper slopes, the solution is a mechanically stabilized earth system reinforced with plastic geogrid webbing. "You lay this fabric out so it extends over the edge of the hill, then you put material on top of that and compact it, and then you wrap the edge of that fabric on top of that layer you just compacted and it extends back into the slope. Then you put more material on top of that and compact it, and wrap up the next layer," Maslyn explains. "In elevation it looks like sausages, or pancakes, stacked on top of each other." David Winter, the vice president of Seattle-based Hart Crowder, the project's geotechnical engineers, says, "We worked with the geogrid designers to figure out ways to extend those grids deeper into the fill and take advantage of the strength they had. As far as I know, that hasn't been done before." A light, volcanic rocklike aggregate is being used in places to lessen the load. And, Winter says, "We looked at ways to sequence the construction, to buttress certain areas, build at certain rates [to



allow consolidation and settling], and control stability that way.” The steepest slopes will be finished with small, gabion-like cages filled with organic soil. Maslyn says, “We can get extreme vertical spaces without using walls, and it can be green.” Typically these cages are L-shaped, “but we found this specific one that is sloped, so we can get a smooth face, not the wedding-cake look.” She says, “We know that people will say, ‘These are artificial hills.’ But we wanted the hypernatural illusion. We didn’t want the bolts showing from Frankenstein’s neck.”

A different kind of complexity has been required to repurpose the island from a moribund military base to a welcoming, mixed-use urban realm. Technically the new park, which is being developed by the Trust for Governors Island, a not-for-profit development corporation controlled by the city, will occupy only about half of the island’s acreage. The park does not include a 22-acre piece encompassing the two forts, which had

earlier been designated a national monument and is maintained by the National Park Service. Two future commercial development zones totaling 33 acres have also been delineated, one at each side of the flat extension. Another 30-some acres are taken up by existing buildings intended for eventual occupation by both commercial and nonprofit tenants. So far those include the New York Harbor School, a public high school with a curriculum focused on maritime and marine studies; several arts organizations maintaining both offices and studios for working artists; and, coming soon, the first commercial tenant, a day spa. The island is, and increasingly will be, more than just a park. Yet these various other activities are all seamlessly approachable; there’s no actual boundary, for example, between the national monument and the new park; neither will there be between the park

**TOP**  
Epic views of the Statue of Liberty are part of the park’s horizon.

**INSET**  
The impressed pattern of the precast edging suggests bubbles or waves.

TIMOTHY SCHENCK, TOP; TRUST FOR GOVERNORS ISLAND, BOTTOM



**ABOVE**  
Although water is all around, it’s not always visible—“the classic conceal and reveal.”

**BELOW**  
Afternoon bike rides draw a diverse crowd.



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and the commercial zones once they are built. So in the visitor experience, the island and the park are effectively a unified whole.

The agreement that transferred the island from the federal government’s control to New York State and City stipulated that it must remain forever publicly accessible, and that the largest portion would be for parkland and open space, including a continuous promenade around the 2.2-mile perimeter. Long-term housing is prohibited (except for island staff). Encouraged are educational, historic, and cultural uses; entertainment, hospitality, conference, and health facilities; and retail and commercial office space. Some of these activities will be housed in the existing building stock of the historic district; currently about a quarter of the available 1.4 million square feet of that is occupied. The rest will be new construction in two future development

zones. It’s intriguing to imagine when all this is built out and occupied—all these activities sharing space, intermixed, so many of the elements of any vibrant, redeveloping American city center, but in a park setting, minus the cars. Picture day-tripping families with picnic baskets mingling with conventioners, IT and creative-industry workers, boho artists and underemployed hipsters, shutterbugging tourists and the irrepressible teens of the Harbor School. Anyway, that is in the future. But “a maritime high school and a destination day spa, they magnify the effect of the island on the city,” says the trust’s president, Leslie Koch, who previously headed New York’s Fund for Public Schools. “The day spa will be advertising the island. The work created in the artists’ studios goes out through the city; it’s an incubator for other projects.” She adds, “I don’t have a specific answer what will be, building by building. But we were very deliberate in choosing to invest in glorious public space first, to make it a destination.”

The trust has multiple tasks. It must oversee the creation of the park and the renovation, or



construction, and leasing of buildings. It must upgrade the island's infrastructure; there was, for example, no potable water at the time of the ownership transfer. Most important for the success of the new park, and for that goal of creating a destination with the power to attract, the trust must seduce the public into falling in love with a place it once could not visit and only vaguely knew. Even before the park's completion and year-round accessibility, attendance had been soaring. Arts have been a potent lure. In the summer of 2005, two years after the transfer agreement, a smattering of events and installations attracted about 8,000 visitors. It was perhaps a chaste first date, but the affair has been heating up ever since. "How do you develop a new public place in a neighborhood nobody can live in? It's got to be a place for everyone, and what that said to me immediately was, 'We have to do arts there,'" recalls David Koren, the vice president of business development and marketing at ESI Design, who founded Figment, an all-volunteer annual arts fest on the island that had its first iteration in 2007. By 2014, Figment comprised some 300 interactive

projects, and during its weekend festival alone, 27,000 people came over. Figment also mounts summerlong installations each year that include an artist-designed miniature golf course and an architect-designed pavilion made of recycled materials, both reinvented annually.

Figment is now only one element of OpenHouseGI, a myriad of free events and exhibitions every year between May and September when the park is open to the public daily. (By next summer, with construction completed, it will be open year-round.) "We don't fund, select, or curate," Koch says of OpenHouseGI. "We had space, and we had these historic houses and this notion that organizations could use them to create programming." Attracted largely by this lavishness of events, upward of half a million people are now visiting the island every summer. "On one weekend you could have a Civil War reenactment and a punk-rock festival," Maslyn says, "so it's really



**TOP**  
Manhattan's financial district is nearby, but another world.

**ABOVE**  
Mark Handforth's *Saffron Star* is installed through this summer.

© PETER MALJES/ESTO, TOP; TIMOTHY SCHENCK, BOTTOM



**ABOVE**  
The curvaceous first phase of the park is flanked by future development zones.

**BELOW**  
A 2.2-mile promenade encircles the island.



animated and weird." One summer, bold sculptures by the artist Mark di Suvero were installed. During another, there was an antique French carousel. "Both of those felt right in this environment," she says. Longer-term art installations have also been commissioned. "To announce this new park," says the trust art consultant Tom Eccles, who directs curatorial studies at Bard College, it was necessary to "create work that's robust enough to stand up to that landscape. Governors Island is funky. People let their hair down. It's a playground. So I asked Mark Handforth to create these funky, punkish works," including a huge, twisted wire coat hanger and a big gold star that looks as if it dropped from the sky to land with one point stuck in the ground. (They're installed for two years, through 2015.) For Discovery Hill, with its mountain theme, he has commissioned a permanent sculp-

ture, a cast-concrete cabin by Rachel Whiteread. "In the Catskills you find these hunters' cabins; they're not elegant—Tyvek on the exterior," he says, but are instead "somewhere between Thoreau and the Unabomber, this idea of removing oneself into the landscape. But then there's the question of what one is doing there." To suggest answers, Whiteread will also cast and place "the kind of stuff you'd find strewn around cabins in the woods—could be historic [artifacts] but could be beer cans and junk."

The flip side of turning the public on to the island has been eliciting the public's passions for what the park could offer them. In 2007, the trust mounted simultaneous exhibitions of the design-competition proposals at the Center for Architecture in Manhattan and on Governors Island. People were invited to inscribe their desires on Post-it notes, and afterward these thoughts were collated to generate a word cloud. Among the most frequently mentioned were "picnic," "art," "music," "food,"

LIGGETT TERRACE SEASONAL CHARACTER



SPRING

- FLOWERING QUINCE
- AZALEAS
- JAPANESE BLOOD GRASS
- MOUNTAIN FLEECE
- CORALBELLS
- BLOODGOOD JAPANESE MAPLE
- OSHIO BENI JAPANESE MAPLE
- RED MAPLE
- WINTER KING HAWTHORN
- BEEBALM



SUMMER

- HIBISCUS
- MONTBRETIA
- JAPANESE BLOOD GRASS
- MOUNTAIN FLEECE
- CORALBELLS
- BEEBALM
- RED SPIDER LILY
- ROSES
- BLOODGOOD JAPANESE MAPLE
- OSHIO BENI JAPANESE MAPLE



FALL

- SWITCHGRASS
- STONECROP
- MOUNTAIN FLEECE
- ROSES
- CHINA GIRL HOLLY
- FRAGRANT SUMAC
- RED MAPLE
- BLOODGOOD JAPANESE MAPLE
- OSHIO BENI JAPANESE MAPLE
- MAIDENHAIR TREE

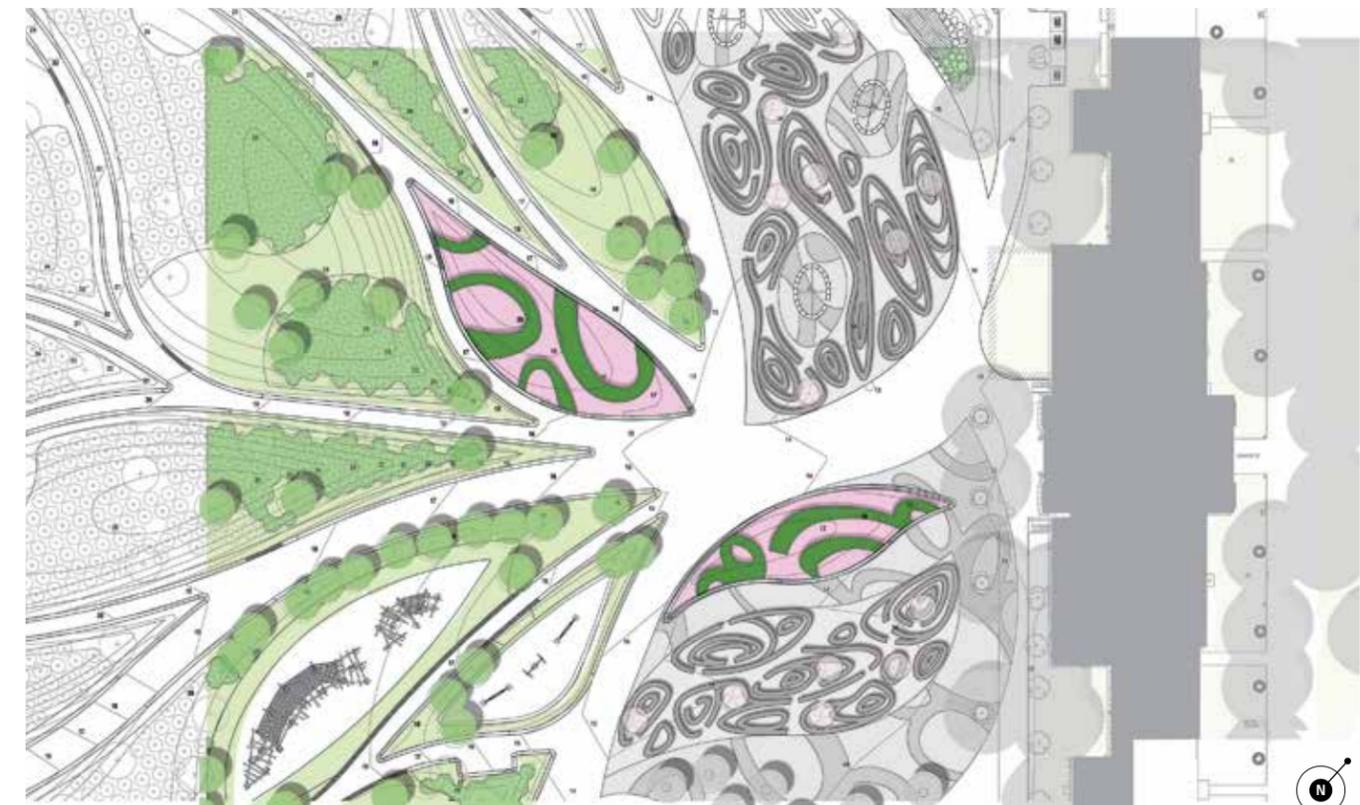


WINTER

- WINTERBERRY HOLLY
- CHINA GIRL HOLLY
- WINTER KING HAWTHORN



MATHEWS NIELSEN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS / WEST 8



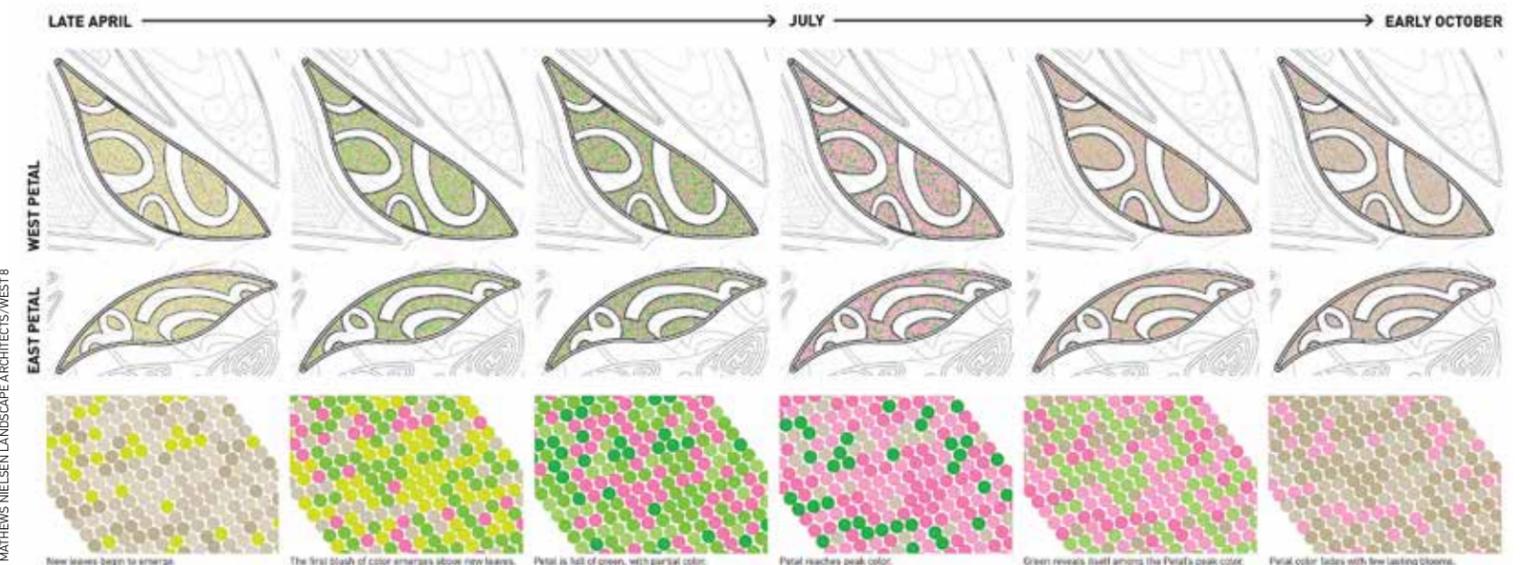
TYPICAL MODULE LAYOUT



Individual plants create a random pattern. Plants from each plant group are weighted to influence bloom time.

- Plant Type A: 15%
- Plant Type B: 25%
- Plant Type C: 35%
- Plant Type D: 15%

PERENNIAL LAYOUT OPTION

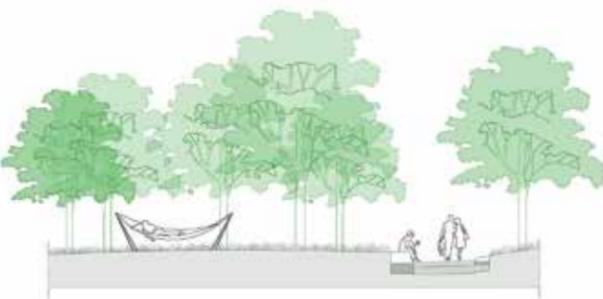
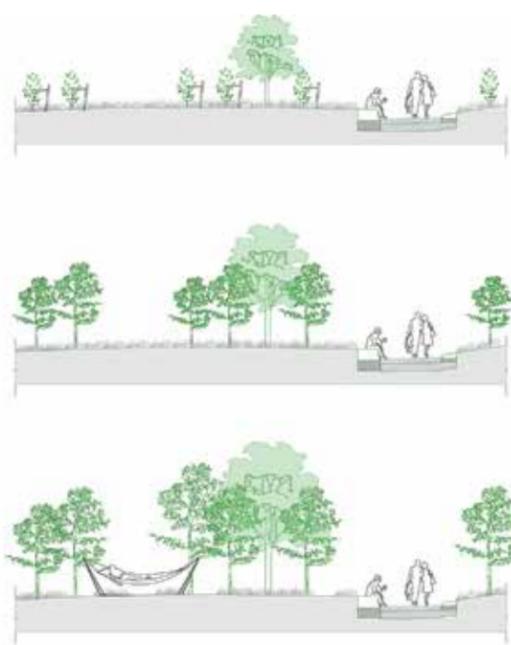


# HAMMOCK GROVE

# HAMMOCK GROVE PLANTING DIAGRAM

CANOPY PROGRESSION

SECTIONS

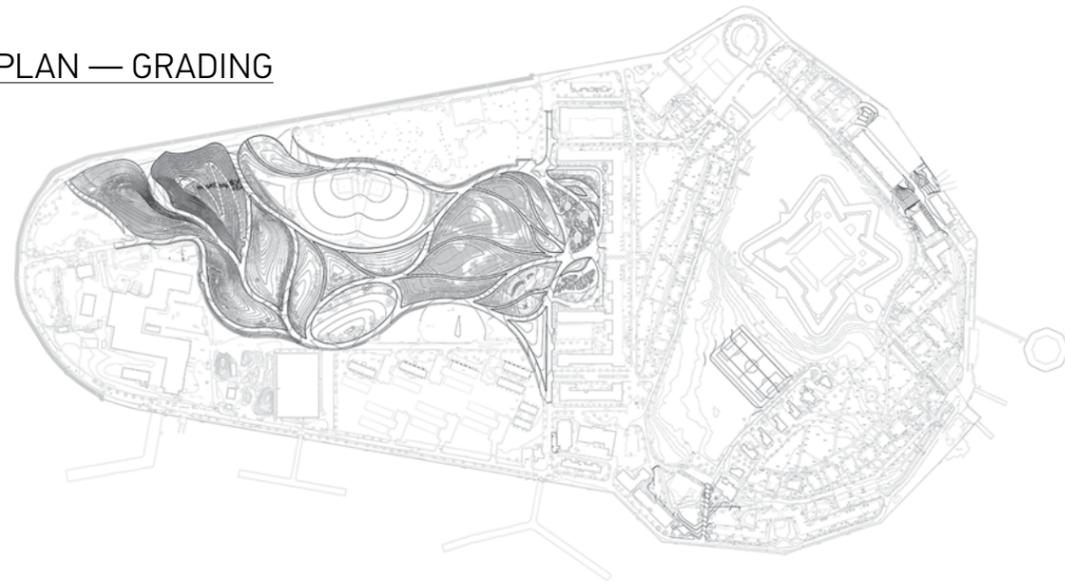


**TREE LIST**

- *Cercis canadensis* (Eastern redbud)
- *Cornus florida* (Flowering dogwood)
- *Magnolia acuminata* (Cucumber tree)
- *Ostrya virginiana* (Hop hornbeam)
- *Asimina triloba* (Pawpaw)
- *Betula nigra 'Cully' Heritage®* (Heritage river birch)
- *Fagus grandifolia* (American beech)
- *Sassafras albidum* (Sassafras)
- *Carya alba* (Mockernut hickory)
- *Carya glabra* (Pignut hickory)
- *Carya laciniata* (Shellbark hickory)
- *Carya ovata* (Shagbark hickory)
- *Carpinus caroliniana* (American hornbeam)
- *Catalpa speciosa* (Northern catalpa)
- *Cladrastis kentukea* (Kentucky yellowwood)
- *Gymnocladus dioica* (Kentucky coffee tree)
- *Juglans nigra* (Black walnut)
- *Liquidambar styraciflua* (American sweet gum)
- *Nyssa sylvatica* (Black gum)
- *Oxydendrum arboreum* (Sourwood)
- *Prunus serotina* (Black cherry)
- *Prunus virginiana* (Chokecherry)
- *Tilia americana* (American linden)
- *Tilia cordata* (Littleleaf linden)
- *Tilia tomentosa* (Silver linden)
- *Ulmus americana 'Princeton'* (Princeton American elm)
- *Quercus alba* (White oak)
- *Quercus bicolor* (Swamp white oak)
- *Quercus coccinea* (Scarlet oak)
- *Quercus imbricaria* (Shingle oak)
- *Quercus macrocarpa* (Bur oak)
- *Quercus palustris* (Pin oak)
- *Quercus rubra* (Northern red oak)
- *Quercus velutina* (Black oak)



SITE PLAN — GRADING



WEST 8

TIMOTHY SCHENCK

**ABOVE**  
Construction of phase two's four hills will conclude this year.



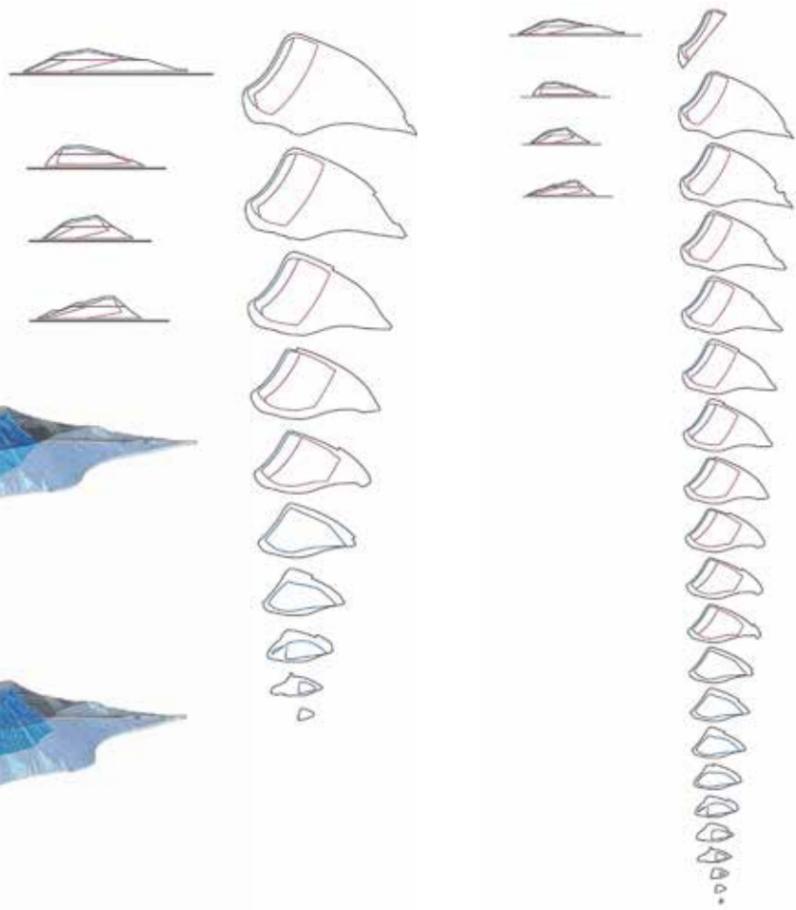
→ “ice cream,” and intangibles like “keep,” “love,” and “free.” “In 2007 we didn’t have ice cream on the island, so we went out and found ice cream vendors,” Koch says. “There’s a lot of cynicism in the public around what people refer to as these engagement strategies, [but] that word cloud helped validate that we were on to something.”

These past summers, when the park has been open, its concept was still being refined. This allowed the trust and West 8, Koch says, “to really see how people are using a space and then discuss those observations and feed that into the design.” For example, “bike” had topped the word list. “We knew how many people brought bikes to the island, and we had a bike rental concession, so knew how many people used bikes. But the word came up on a higher percentage basis than the number of bikers. So we knew that biking was key to the island’s identity.” From observation, it was apparent that “speed wasn’t a concern, despite the conventional wisdom, for the kind of recreational biking that takes place out here,” Koch says. So

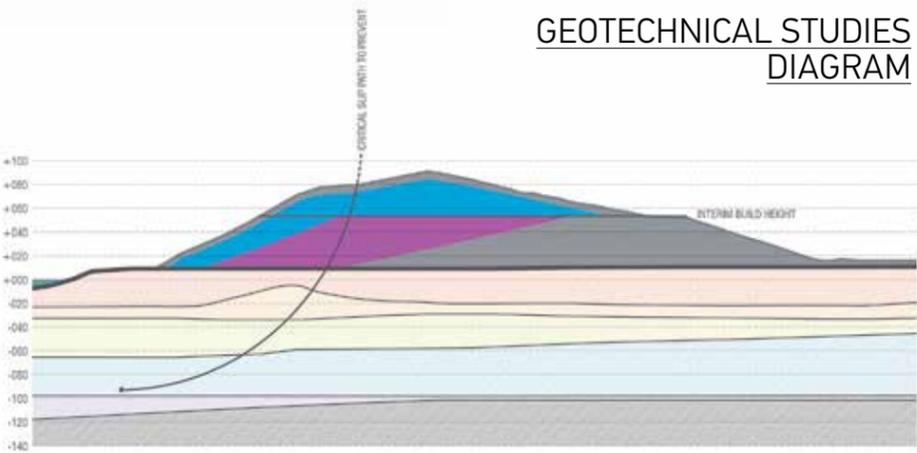
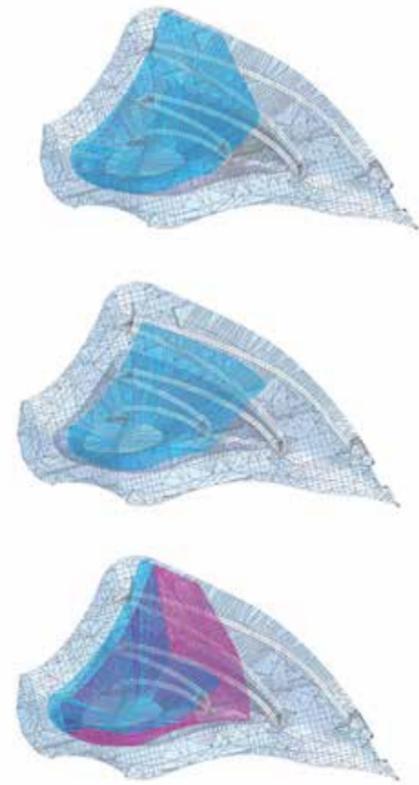
the park was designed with some pedestrian-only paths but also with wide “bike boulevards” shared by cyclists and walkers, including the perimeter promenade and routes that curve among the groves and lawns. To planners at the city’s parks department, “We could say, ‘Look, this happened for three seasons, and there were just a couple of accidents, not caused by the fact that there wasn’t a stripe down the middle.’” (Geuze, a native of famously two-wheeled Holland, had always intended biking to have a presence. West 8’s competition proposal included a bizarre and beautiful design for a bike made of wood, which he hoped would become an icon for the park. Alas, it has never been fabricated.)

Play equipment was another focus of experimentation and observation. “We had this idea that play should be approachable for everyone, no matter your age,” Koch says. When an area called Picnic Point was opened to the public in 2009, it had movable chairs and tables, and swings sized for adults and kids. “It took about six weeks after →

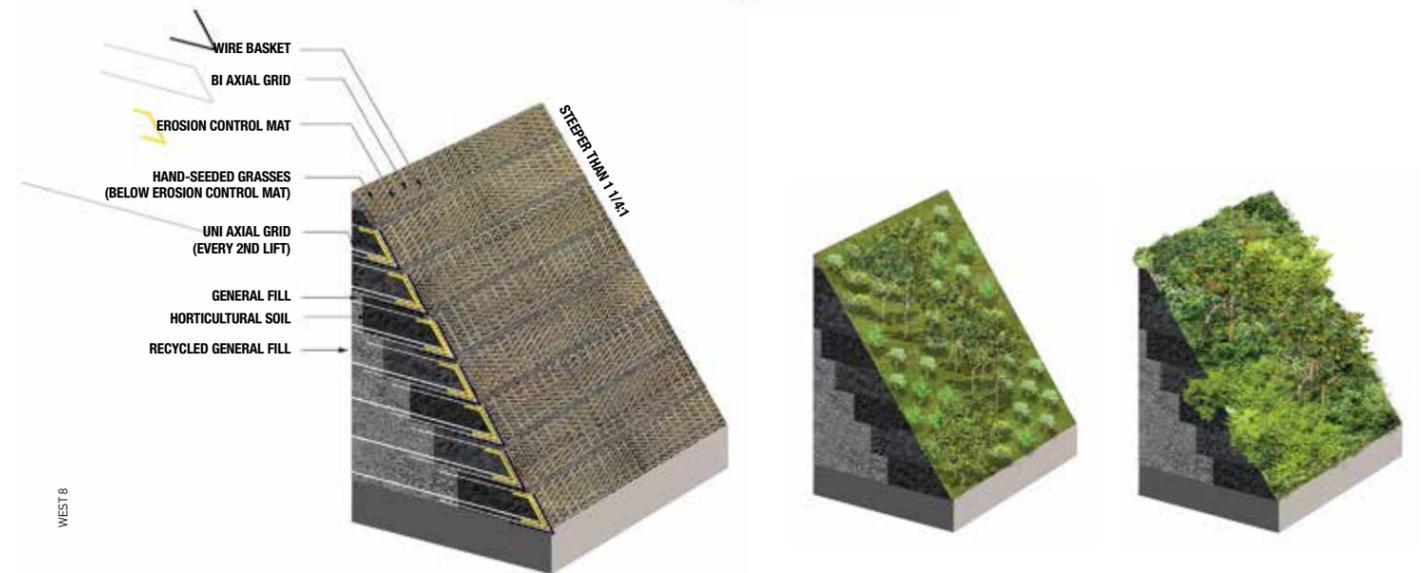
GEOTECHNICAL STUDIES — HORIZONTAL SECTIONS



GEOTECHNICAL STUDIES  
MODEL SHOTS



GEOTECHNICAL/  
PLANTING DETAILS





→ they were installed for nonchildren to begin using them, because in New York City, you're not allowed to be in a playground without a child, so this idea that it was legal to be on the swing took people a little while to adapt to," she says. There were also unfenced climbing structures, although another city standard is that playgrounds must be fenced. "But we learned from experience—both from a desirability standpoint, the public wanted it, and from a safety standpoint, nothing had happened—that you can expose play areas," she says. "Our colleagues in the traditional park system are still taken aback." The swing frames and climbing structures, installed by Richter Spielgeräte, are constructed of logs arranged in relaxed, ostensibly random, geometries. They have a soft, organic profile. Koren, of Figment, who has a six-year-old daughter, says that on the island he has "noticed that with kids there, you can put them on a longer leash. You don't have to be right next to them, because it's a safer space." Another experiment, once bicycling had been so eagerly embraced, was

to see whether people would use surrey bikes—the canopied kind, for multiple riders. "I take clients out there now, developers who are very straitlaced, and they're like, 'Let's rent one of those goofy bikes where there's four of us pedaling,'" Maslyn says. "You feel different out there."

Geuze calls this long period of observation and development "very helpful and unique, and not easy to compare with other clients or other projects. It's an almost primitive way to design a park.... We invite people, and we see what happens." He and Maslyn see the island and its features as democratizing. Geuze imagines a typical visit: "We share a ferry boat. I never met you. We sit next to each other, and 'Nice weather,' or 'Whoa! The boat is rocking,'" he mimics. "We queue. We pick up a bicycle, but we are not a good biker, and we laugh about ourselves. That kind of element brings a sense of democracy. Your income, your education, your neighborhood are not relevant." And with movable furniture, "If we are with 10, we organize our own 10 seats."

**ABOVE**  
Cycling has become key to the island's identity.

**OPPOSITE**  
Parkgoers disembark from the Manhattan ferry.

TIMOTHY SCHENCK



TIMOTHY SCHENCK

West 8 has a reputation for edgy design. "But quite a bit of our work is romantic," Maslyn insists. On Governors Island, "It was just more natural. There are no straight lines. Everything's undulating. This is a feminine landscape," all in support of the views. Geuze sums it up more snappily. "It's about the horizon, stupid." That outward orientation creates a paradoxical inversion of scale. The setting is potent and enormous, but the experience of being on the island is thoroughly unimposing. Because harbor panoramas repeatedly fill your eyes, it's as if the entire bay and every object and opposite shoreline in it constitute the park. Yet even very grand and relatively distant things like the Statue of Liberty, or the Staten Island Ferry churning back and forth, or the expanse of water itself seem intimate and close. They seem yours. ●

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