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“Opening Out Toward the Water”—Transforming New York’s Waterfront

By Rutherford H. Platt, 12/17/2009 2:57:32 PM

New York's waterfront when Henry Hudson arrived in 1609 was an arcadian shore of forests, wetlands, and sand bars according to Eric Sanderson's book *Mannahatta*. That landscape is lost forever, but visions of a post-industrial, neo-natural waterfront are longstanding. In 1944, futurists Paul and Percival Goodman proposed that Manhattan "open out toward the water"—lining its gritty waterfront with new parks and (shocking to relate) even surrendering Central Park for housing and offices. While Central Park remains intact, the rest of their advice was prescient: Manhattan's 32-mile shoreline--still dominated by piers, highways, power plants, and waste facilities--is slowly gaining a chain of new parks, bike lanes, and other public spaces, grandly designated by the N.Y. Department of City Planning as the "Manhattan Waterfront Greenway."

While twelve miles of the "Greenway" still follows city streets like First Avenue, the transformation of much of Manhattan's waterfront from "no-man's-land" to a "highly desirable zone of parks," in the words of Phillip Lopate, is a spectacular planning work in progress, a maritime "Perimeter Park" to complement Central Park. Close by, Brooklyn Bridge Park and Governors Island when eventually completed will add to the complex of parks along the Upper Harbor amid one of the world's most spectacular cityscapes. And beneath the shimmering harbor surface lies a recovering ecosystem of growing fascination to city kids thanks to The Harbor School, The River Project, Solar 1, and other environmental education programs.

You can't build parks in the 21st Century the way Central Park and Chicago's Lakeshore Parks were created. Central Park was a single vast city project under the unified if embattled control of the legendary Frederick Law Olmsted. The raw Chicago lakefront in 1836 was declared "forever open, clear and free of buildings" by public deed restriction (later reaffirmed by the Illinois Supreme Court).

No such sweeping mandates are available to create parks today. Instead, the Manhattan Waterfront Greenway is cobbled together from an assortment of bits and pieces--Battery Park City, Hudson River Park, Riverside Park South, Stuyvesant Cove Park, and so on. Each of these segments reflects a unique chronicle of past uses and recent struggles among property owners, community groups, developers, politicians, planners, lawyers, and other stakeholders. Public-private partnerships and a multiplicity of regulatory agencies further complicate the process. (The Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance will soon release a report highlighting ways to simplify waterfront permitting.)

New waterfront parks in New York are not limited to "land" which is in short supply (especially since the demise of "Westway" in the 1980s in effect put new landfill off the table indefinitely). The new Hudson River Park ("Westway Lite") will offset a shortage of terra firma by spreading onto thirteen piers, existing or under construction. That park also includes a 400-acre marine sanctuary bordering the shoreline. The High Line Greenway, near the Hudson River shoreline in Chelsea, is being constructed on an abandoned rail viaduct. Riverbank State Park sits on the roof of the North River Sewage Treatment Plant. And thanks to Ann L. Bittenwieser, the "Floating Pool Lady" now adds a swimming pool barge to the city's waterfront park inventory.

New York thus continues to be inventive and resourceful in responding to the challenges of rapid growth and change. In the past, this talent was reflected in the Commissioners Plan of 1811, the Croton Water System and its trans-Hudson expansion, the Olmsted parks, the Brooklyn Bridge, the five-borough consolidation, and the nation's first zoning law, among other "firsts." Today, the creative transformation of the city's waterfront--one battlefield at a time--suggests New York still contributes to world experience in how to sustain millions of diverse and contentious people who live, work, and play in very close proximity. *Rutherford Platt, a member of the American Geographical Society's Writers Circle, is Professor of Geography Emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and a Senior Fellow with the CUNY Institute for Sustainable Cities. He is the Editor of The Humane Metropolis: People and Nature in the 21st*

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