

# ARCHITECTURE VIEW: THE GREENING OF LIBERTY PARK

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**W**ith the Bicentennial, we are beginning to look at this country with a mix of perspective and poignancy; the New World grows old, and so do its cities, plans and dreams. The raw frontier town has become the decaying urban core, its one lasting amenity often the public park set aside in forgotten battles a century ago.

It is the American park, in fact, from the great national network of natural wonders to the "emerald necklaces" that many cities acquired around the turn of the century, that is emerging as one of this country's finest features. We take these parks very much for granted. That the center of Manhattan Island, for example, should be preserved, forever green, for public use, was unthinkable to New York's surveyors in 1811 as they ran their rectangular grid of streets across the island's entire surface in a devout gesture to the sanctity of the negotiable real estate lot. Less than half a century later, however, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux created Central Park in the city's heart. It took another 20 years of administrative, political and financing wrangling to carry it out; the park was a miracle—then and now.

Another park miracle of equal import is inching forward in the New York region today. In any account of coming events, Liberty Park must stand as one of the most important, for it will be one of the decade's major achievements in landscape architecture for public use. Still in the development stage, it will transform 800 acres on the New Jersey shore, fronting on New York Harbor, into an unparalleled local and regional asset. Conceived about 18 years ago, it has a long way to go. But the design for the park, by the architectural firm of Geddes, Brecher, Qualls, Cunningham and landscape architects Zion and Breen, is now virtually complete. There is important seed money, including funds from a New Jersey open-space bond issue with which work has been started, and a resolute Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, David J. Bardin, who is determined to see it through.

## ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

# The Greening of Liberty Park

The fact that Liberty Park can, and will be, built in stages, over a period of time, makes a large undertaking of this sort practical in terms of the substantial amounts of work and money required. When it is finished, its two-mile length (about the size of Central Park) will feature a breeze-swept waterfront promenade, backed by meadows and trees in Olmsted's naturalistic tradition. There will be active and passive recreation, and a galaxy of ambitious proposals for food, fun and games includes the restoration of an old railroad terminal for cultural uses at the northern border of the site. That work is proceeding now. At the southern edge, 35 acres of landscaping were completed in time to serve as New Jersey's vantage point for the Bicentennial fireworks.

The location of the park is superb. Situated on the eastern shore of New Jersey, immediately southwest of lower Manhattan and directly across from Brooklyn and Staten Island, it is virtually in the center of the harbor's embrace. Unlike the larger and more spread-out National Gateway Park along the open ocean outside the harbor, Liberty Park is totally enclosed by populous land areas. It is as close to Manhattan across the water as to Jersey City inland. This is a key site in the harbor's grand sweep—part of the real and symbolic entrance to the city.

At the moment, except for the initial development at

the southern end, Liberty Park is a spectacular dump. It is a derelict landscape of weeds, litter, rotting piers and the flotsom and jetsom of sea and citylife. Even more spectacular, however, is the view from the site—across to the full drama of the New York skyline and the rear of the Statue of Liberty, with ships gliding by. (Ellis Island, recently opened to limited tourism, is also just offshore.) A visit to the area is a surreal experience. Anyone who has explored it comes away with a Man Ray impression of acres of civilization's cast-off paraphernalia and every beer can ever manufactured, in endless sea grass, with Liberty holding her torch aloft in the wrong direction against a theatrical backdrop of Mammon's towers. It is a sleeper of a landscape, awaiting one mammoth magic touch to awaken to great beauty.

That awakening has begun. Those who watched the fireworks last month from Liberty Park traveled a new road lined with 50 state flags to a large grassy mound circled with more giant flags. There were picnic tables, benches, walks, and that incomparable Statue of Liberty view. The \$2.4 million cost of this first 35-acre section was paid for by the Federal Department of the Interior and the American Bicentennial Commission. The state now owns 300 of the projected 800 acres, and expects to acquire another 300 by

the end of this year. The master plan includes staging, funding, engineering, operation and management recommendations, as well as the physical design.

Because the New Jersey "green acres" bond issue of 1974 authorizes park development as well as land acquisition, matching funds will be available both for land purchase and for construction of the plan. The building of the park is currently phased through 1981, but it will take many more years. Eventually, the southern tip will become a major plaza and harbor overlook, with a marina. A natural marshy area just beyond this point is being preserved as a wildlife refuge. At the northern end, where the site is terminated by the railroad station, the land becomes more urban, and there are visions of Tivoli-type features.

Along the full length of the park's western boundary there will be a meandering waterway, or serpentine. To the east, the entire two-mile waterfront will be a continuous, crescent-shaped promenade lined with willows. The promenades will be backed by a landscaped earth berm that will also serve as a windbreak to make the sunny walk usable all year. This harbor esplanade could be one of the urban area's greatest pleasures. Between the serpentine and the promenade will be a broad green expanse with clustered plantings of black pine and deciduous and flowering trees.

A harbor cleanup, which will remove the debris and old piers, begins this month, financed by two-thirds Federal and one-third State money. The next step is an application to the Corps of Engineers to build the levee for the promenade. Much of the civil engineering, such as earthfill and drainage, will be done by the Port of New York Authority. Next year should see the arrangement of viewing facilities in the wildlife refuge. And users are being sought now for the recycled railroad.

If the plan is vast and visionary, it is also rational and organized, and it is very well begun. Liberty Park could be the most dramatic open space in the metropolitan region in the next century.

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