

# PREFACE



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## Washed Ashore – Infinite Opportunities

Having arrived in New York City to launch my studio in 1970, I was appalled with the state of the “world’s greatest” city’s waterfront; rotting piers and inaccessible post-industrial sites were severed from the city by ribbons of highway. Sound familiar? Countless cities across the globe have suffered a similar state of neglect. Recent public demand for waterfront accessibility, coupled with development pressure, has led to a rediscovery, reclamation and revitalisation movement. In some cases, with minimal regulations, environmental controls or public approvals, some government sponsored development plans have brought about extraordinary waterfront parks seemingly overnight. Other waterfronts, however, have moved at what seemed to be a glacial pace.

After many failed attempts to redevelop an extraordinary 65-acre Manhattan rail yard site on the Hudson River, our team proposed a plan for Riverside Park South in which a 26-acre park would be the site’s centerpiece. The park plan was approved in 1991 yet only had its first water edge phases completed in 2008! Unbelievably, a core element of the plan, the relocation of an elevated highway that visually divides the community and upland park from the river, is still mired in a bureaucratic morass and likely to be years away from completion. Across town, Brooklyn Bridge Park, first conceived nearly 20 years ago, only had its first phase completed in 2010. It’s clear, designing waterfronts is not for the faint-hearted or impatient, but the payoff is spectacular!

Today, the landscape urbanism and waterfront reclamation movements are inextricably linked and are now as inevitable as the rising sun. Signifying shared values and cultural ambition, waterfronts provide a unique lens by which the viewer, depending on their position, is able to see across a seemingly intimate expanse. Perhaps it’s the dialogue between oppositional environs, or simply the feeling of being against a great precipice constantly in motion, that brings a magical attraction to waterfronts. Whether it’s the offer of land or water, refuge or prospect, here or there; it stirs the emotions. These aqueous edges create one-of-a-kind experiences, which in turn provide transactions that can be both innate and otherworldly.

As the waterfront movement has gained momentum, expectations have risen. Whereas 25 years ago, we might have been satisfied with simply staking a claim at the water’s edge and forging a few informal trails, today’s educated public demands truly remarkable civic gestures that strike dramatic poses on the edges of our cities and define our future aspirations as a society. The design of contemporary public landscapes requires both sensitivity to context and the ability to convey, often with clarity and restraint, qualities that are most special. Indexing a site, and specifically the ways in which recreation, art, architecture, and culture interact with the natural world within both near and broader geographic contexts, allows one to create a new alchemy of space.

As plural environments, the design of waterfront parks requires a dynamic process involving collision and collaboration. This rich plurality presents the greatest opportunity to form singular, large-scale transformations where landscape, infrastructure, and urbanism are woven into a unified whole. More than seams between city and water, these sites are metaphorical links between our past, present and future. In order to avoid monotony these linear landscapes most often require the definition of distinct zones that have the ability to treat individual areas like episodes in a narrative while providing breathing room for the in-between. Encoded in these delightfully episodic waterfront systems are the collective ambitions of the local communities through which they pass as is evident in the design for the Promenade Samuel-de Champlain. Recounting the coastal environs and the local timber industry, this highly expressive park repurposes a waterfront site and conveys a history unique of place through a contemporary design language, much in the same way that Riverside Park South takes on a rich narrative about the co-existence of rail systems and waterfronts in the industrialised city.

To change the paradigm of what a waterfront should be often involves moving constituents away from their initial ideas of a single purpose site and into a dialogue about the contemporary culture of public open spaces. The choice need not be “past or future”, “active or passive”; it can be all, a richly layered space, regenerative and resilient, springing to life by inviting human and natural processes to co-exist. Registering deeply in the psyche of the visitors, these types of landscape typologies enrich the visitor experience, forging stewards of the resilient ecological systems where land meets water. Southport Broadwater Parklands is a project that features an extensive co-mingling of ecology and social systems, evoking both native ecosystems and regional cultural landscapes. The site gives vast acreage to natural processes while maximising its value to the visitor and community.

While many waterfronts are fast becoming large scale sculptures that often appear as no more than one-liners, the question deserves asking: “Will these landscape sculptures have enough public input to be the truly democratic spaces that endure the test of time? ” Having chaired the competition jury that selected HTO Park, I offer an unequivocal “yes”. Urban waterfronts need not feel as if they are obligated to recreate a “Garden of Eden” detached from natural history; instead the new waterfront can design with nature, allowing natural processes to melded with cultural expressiveness, and remain relevant and accessible while also preserving the transcendent quality of the open space. These expressive spaces draw crowds, add iconography to cities desperate for character, and capture the public imagination by remixing the familiar in new and unexpected ways. To sustain this success, contemporary designers have embraced a process in which outreach, stakeholders and collaboration are valued as vital components of this design process, along with art and innovation.

Waterfronts continually evolve, moving through phases and meanings. Whereas many waterfronts were originally developed as industrial zones that drove urban growth, their purpose is changing. The financing of this transformation is also moving away from private or public entities into public/private partnerships where their motivations and end-goals are more varied than ever before. A complicated weave (and sometimes conflict) of natural ecology, tourism, culture, leisure, transport, security, and politics is taking hold and their boundaries are becoming more obscure. Notions of global sustainability are manifesting themselves on the shores of every coast. The opportunities are infinite.

It’s clear from this book’s extraordinary curation of waterfronts of all shapes and sizes that the door of design opportunity opened wide for these designers and they have stormed in! What designers, sponsors and advocates do with this newfound public trust and artistic freedom should be of collective concern to the design community. Will we overextend our design muscles again at the expense of public benefit and urbanism goals, similar to the mid-century modernist architecture movement that lost public support, or will we fuse our design passions with the 21<sup>st</sup> century principles of environmental and social sustainability?

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