The Tale of Two Parks on New York City’s Two Rivers
The Politics, Tactics, and Complexities of Urban Waterfront Park Design

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Two parks; two rivers; two boroughs; one common goal: to transform a post-industrial riverfront into a multi-layered public amenity. This is the story of how two design firms navigated complex public processes and political currents to deliver two of New York City’s most successful waterfront parks.

Learning Objectives:
1. Learn how overcoming challenges inherent in the public process can result in better-designed public open spaces
2. Understand how public-private partnerships generate funds on the front end and back end of large scale projects
3. Understand the environmental and infrastructural challenges and constraints that come with designing post-industrial waterfronts
4. Examine how historical narratives are used as the basis for 21st Century park design
5. Witness the benefits of a broad and balanced application of social, economic, cultural and environmental strategies
OUTLIINE:

I. Introduction
   a. The industrial history of waterfronts in New York City
   b. Brief chronology of events and the shifting political climate
   c. Riverside Park South (RPS) and Brooklyn Bridge Park (BBP) – the differences

II. Riverside Park South - 26 Acres

   A. Context and Challenges
      1. Stitches together the Olmsted’s historic Riverside Park to the north with the new Hudson River Park to the south, creating a continuous swath of parkland along Manhattan’s Hudson River
      2. Elevated highway runs the length of the site; phasing plans accommodate two highway scenarios
      3. Elevation obstacles on site; 35’ grade change between upland streets and the river below
      4. Sponsors and financing overview
      5. EIS testing required mitigation and marine engineering

   B. Politics and Money
      1. Six non-profit civic groups spearheaded the creation of master plan that was contingent on developing the waterfront for public use
      2. Zoning incentives: 21.5 acre park played a critical role in the approval of a 65-acre mixed-use development
      3. Hudson Waterfront Associates to pay for the design and construction of the park and fund its future maintenance
      4. FAR mitigated by the creation of parkland; specific amount of development triggers a proportional amount of park
      5. Development phasing independent of the park phasing

   C. Public Process
      1. Unique civic alliance offers alternative to developer’s plan
      2. Civic Alliance and design team conducts public forums and focused stakeholder meetings
      4. Alliance, city, and community reviews of each Phase involves shifting personalities and program criteria
D. Design
1. Recreational pier built atop an old shipping pier extends 715' into the Hudson providing unprecedented views and fishing opportunities.
2. Edge naturalization, tidal wetlands, native planting and habitat creation mimic pre-development conditions.
3. Paths and overlooks are angled to reflect a train’s turning radius and the old pier alignments, recalling the industrial history of the park.
4. Network of boardwalks and esplanades allow user interaction with the river.

III. Brooklyn Bridge Park - 85 Acres

A. Context and Challenges
1. Shipping decline causes the Port Authority to close its cargo operations, leaving several large derelict piers.
2. Site is flat and predominately paved, all traces of original shoreline ecology are absent.
3. Site is designed for industrial shipping, not recreational use.
4. Elevation difference and the Brooklyn Queens Expressway limit points of access between nearby neighborhoods and the waterfront.
5. Harsh waterfront environment - windy and noisy.
7. History - how to preserve some sense of historic continuity and authenticity while still making the site the best park it can be?

B. Politics and Money
1. Grassroots efforts to preserve the waterfront as a public amenity in opposition to commercial development interests.
2. State and city funding for the park’s design and construction with the stipulation that, once built, the park had to be economically self-sufficient.
3. Reliant on future development at Piers 1 & 6 to generate park-sustaining revenue to fund operations and long-term upkeep.
4. Brooklyn Bridge Corporation vs. Brooklyn Bridge Conservancy: planning for maintenance and programming.

C. Public Process
1. Multi-scalar - reaching out in many different ways.
to the community
i. Open meetings
ii. Focused stakeholder sessions
iii. Storefront presentations
2. Adaptive – not just following a set plan, but devising new outreach strategies as the project evolves
3. For the duration – the most focused period of design outreach took place from 2003-2008, but the conversation started earlier, during initial master planning, and continues as new phases of the park are built

D. Design
1. Inherent risk in giving the economic planning role to the park design team
2. Understanding the unique opportunity
   i. Embrace heterogeneity of site, don’t erase existing character
   ii. Water/land edge can be experienced in a variety of ways
   iii. Working with non standard materials, accepting risk of unexpected
3. Structural Economy – aligning program with capacity of site, tactical resource deployment
5. Environmental sustainability – what does that mean in this circumstance? Not just one strategy - pursued on multiple levels from site master planning through to ongoing maintenance
6. Urban Junctions – capitalizing on malleability of context: creating conditions where the park supports the neighborhood and the neighborhood supports the park
7. Built in phases, learning from each phase as it opens and allowing evolving knowledge influence design

IV. Conclusion
How mainstream New Yorkers have embraced both parks followed by Q & A