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Gantry Plaza State Park Queens, New York

Gantry Plaza State Park is a new riverfront space in Long Island City, Queens, across the East River from the United Nations, and one of the first elements of a Battery Park City-style development project called Queens West. It was praised by the jury for its design qualities and for its success in becoming a community and civic open space.

The \$12 million, six-acre park is the public edge of a scheme to transform a declining industrial waterfront into seventy-four acres of high-rise housing, office towers and public facilities. It began design in 1993, opened in phases and was completed in 2001.

The focal point of the park is a pair of gantries that once lifted trains onto barges that carried them between Long Island and New Jersey; the gantries are preserved in a state of arrested decay as dramatic icons visible from Manhattan and up and down the waterfront.

The park consists of diverse settings—lawn and plaza, garden and cove, shoreline and piers—that engage visitors in a range of activities, such as contemplation, sunbathing, fishing, strolling and public gatherings, and provide access to the water in different ways. Four reconstructed piers are outfitted for special activities—ferry terminal; cafe; sunbathing and stargazing; fishing—while allowing general public access.

Materials and finishes range from rough and rugged to polished and refined, reflecting the area's transition from work zone to public amenity, from natural environment to urban public space; the colors, shapes and sounds one experiences highlight this as well.

The project included extensive consultations with residents of nearby working-class communities, many of whom were skeptical of and antagonistic to Queens West, fearing displacement of their homes and workplaces. Outreach through questionnaires, meetings and interviews provided insight into programming, planning and design criteria. Later, neighborhood leaders, public sponsors, local politicians, historians, ecologists and exhibit designers assisted the design team in considering how the park could make strong links to the community and enhance the experiences of those who visit. The park has become widely popular—some 30,000 people have gathered there to watch Independence Day fireworks, and many residents have joined to create a “Friends of Gantry Plaza State Park” to watch over its management and maintenance.

Gantry Plaza State Park has set a standard for New York City's waterfront revival and redefined its neighborhood's image and sense of place. Visitors from all walks of life, of all ages and backgrounds come to appreciate Gantry Plaza—and, more importantly, they are returning. “People are coming to hang out,” designer Thomas Balsley says. “That's what it's all about.”

—*Todd W. Bressi, Katy Chey*

Top: Reconstructed piers face the Midtown Manhattan skyline.

Bottom: The Interpretive Gardens are one of several elements that provide access to the water. The texture of the materials recalls the site's industrial history; new plantings are native to the shoreline ecosystem.

Photos courtesy Thomas Balsley Associates





A Transition Zone

Standing in Gantry Plaza State Park on a cold winter afternoon, one has a view of Manhattan that is both unexpected and breathtaking. The East River shore, much of its length obstructed by abandoned industrial lots and gated by chain-link fences, is open and accessible here. Manhattan's skyline spreads out in front of you, crisp and bright in the chilly breeze. The water captures metallic hues reflected from the United Nations Secretariat, so close across the channel, its perfect geometry facing you from a distant future. All around you, the park unravels its tales along the Long Island City waterfront.

Gantry Plaza State Park is a sophisticated waterfront design that has transformed this largely deserted, but once-bustling, shoreline. The complex interplay of public spaces, plantings and industrial elements, new and old, offer an interpretation of the neighborhood's past while looking ahead ambitiously to its controversial future.

The park's central space is a large, semicircular plaza surfaced in smooth stone; it provides a stage for large gatherings and a terrace for sitting quietly and contemplating. Serving as a backdrop, and framing the view of the river and the skyline beyond, are two gigantic, black industrial structures—gantries that once lifted rail cars on and off barges and now stand as a bold testament to the activities that once took place here. The toil of their past work disappeared, their surfaces restored and their surroundings purified, the structures have been reclaimed as sophisticated icons of urban archeology.

Water—accessible, tangible, engaging—is the most crucial element, the very essence of the place. The complex articulation of the shoreline, with its interplay of natural and artificial elements, is part of a larger design strategy intended to guide the visitor to the edge, which no longer seeks to exclude prospective users.

At river's edge, the park negotiates its identity with the water's ceaseless movement, its ever-changing color and

texture. Culture and nature seem to exchange meaning and memory in an osmotic movement along the shore. Split-faced, pink granite blocks step down to the river, allowing visitors to make contact with the water; native grasses grow among the rocks, suggesting that the upland ecological system is re-establishing itself.

Infrastructure, new and old, plays a mediating force. Abandoned tracks, once the lifeline of the economy, are now partly covered by gravel in a contemplative garden where wild grasses and granite blocks alternate in a loose association of historic allusions. A new stainless steel walk arcs gracefully over the river and gaps in the riverbank, a precise, elegant line that contrasts with the roughness and constant change of the water's edge. Four piers project silently over the river, adding a new layer of history by meandering over some of the old piles while leaving others in exposed decay; they stretch toward Manhattan in a visual and temporal longing for the city, affirming the new neighborhood's integral connection to Midtown.

Every amenity in the park is conceived with precision and patiently crafted, adding a thick layer of cultural interpretation to the site—the beautifully designed, stainless steel upland light fixtures; the blue lights along the piers that mark the original barge bays; the metal bar counter that looms toward the river's stunning views.

As finely executed as the park is, though, these elements belie the transition the Queens waterfront (as well as industrial production in New York City) is undergoing. They seem closer in spirit to a SoHo industrial warehouse than to the blue-collar community whose residents make up a large constituency for the park. The historic interpretation of the site seems apprehensive; the formal aspects of the site's design seem to be more a meditation on the artifacts of industry than a rediscovery of past human labor and challenges.

The piers provide opportunities for numerous activities, such as sunbathing, stargazing, fishing and quiet contemplation of the Midtown Manhattan skyline.

Photographs of the site before the park was built show the gantries as grand relics on a crumbling shore—unpolished and dirty, painted with layers of graffiti, products of the cyclical processes of growth and decay in urban places. The gantries are reminiscent, in their humble yet powerful appearance, of the industrial towers of Richard Haag’s Gas Works Park on Lake Union in Seattle. Those simple towers, unedited, speak eloquently about human production and its environmental consequences. The graffiti that remains on their surfaces testifies to the dialogue that surrounds our urban industrial legacy.

At Gas Works Park, the projects of reclaiming an industrial landscape and creating a new park evolved harmoniously. Some structures have been turned into functional facilities, allowing them to be inhabited creatively. The children’s play area consists of an old compressor machine, still in its original barn; an old exhauster building was converted into a covered picnic area.

In these places, the relationship between site and user is understated and open. The spaces and elements of Gas Works Park do not feel as tightly organized as those at Gantry Plaza do: their associations are suggested but not asserted; they extend a friendly invitation to explore and play. The materials feel creatively transformed, not imported or overly crafted.

Gantry Plaza State Park is conceived, designed and built to a level of quality not often seen in New York City public spaces: the restoration of the gantries is refined, the gardens, piers and plaza are distinctive and memorable. The park is a remarkable statement about one of the neighborhood’s possible futures—as an unexpected, sophisticated gem on the roughness of the Long Island shore.

—*Ilaria Salvadori*

Gantry Plaza State Park, Queens, N.Y.

Clients: Empire State Development Corporation (Frances Huppert, Senior Vice President, Design and Construction), Queens West Development Corporation (George Aridas, President), New York City Economic Development Corporation (Charles Millard, President), Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (Gregory Matviak), New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (James Moogan)

Design: Thomas Balsley, Lee Weintraub, Richard Sullivan, Laura Auerback, William Harris, Sam Lawrence

Jury Comments

Griffin: The design gives you all kinds of choices and opportunities. The Rosie the Riveter Memorial and Goitzsche projects seem to be more scripted for a specific experience, and Rosie has a very narrative experience. Gantry doesn’t do that; you could go there and be in the place and never know what the gantry was for, and that’s alright.

Hood: The designers have done a great job of creating the spaces that surround the gantries; the gantries are substantial objects, and they don’t quite disappear, but they just become a part of the place.

Sommer: I was impressed by the outreach program, with questionnaires, interviews. They connected the community to the river, which hadn’t been done before. I also liked the way that they designed for night experience.

Hanrahan: It’s not only successful, but it says that it is truly possible to build places where you can get to the river and look at Manhattan. It was the first new riverfront park with a pier, and now everyone wants to do a pier.

Corbett: Is it well done?

Hanrahan: It’s fantastic. There are a lot of unusual little parts to it. You get out on those piers, that’s the best part.

Corbett: And those big gantries ...

Hanrahan: Walk under those structures, and it’s superb.