

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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Liberty Park — First of a New Breed

Vision, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. It can probably be safely said that few have beheld vision in New Jersey. That does not mean that this quality is lacking; it is just not the perceived hallmark of the state. New Yorkers, in particular, think of New Jersey in terms of a double-fare taxi ride through a surreal Refineryland on the way to Newark Airport; others think of it as an equally surreal Casinoland on the ocean, or Developerland on the Palisades. Princeton, or Short Hills, or Long Branch, seem very far away.

Not many people regard New Jersey as "the symbolic entrance to the United States." But that is how Arthur Drexler, director of the Museum of Modern Art's department of architecture and design, characterizes Liberty State Park, the subject of a museum exhibition that will run through Nov. 25. This urban state park, the first of a new breed, has been designed by the architectural firm of Geddes, Brecher, Qualls, Cunningham and landscape architects Zion and Breen. Conceived 20 years ago, it is in the first stages of construction now, and optimistically, could be completed in another 10 years. The exhibition consists of models, drawings and photographs of the master plan created for the state of New Jersey in 1974.

The size of the show is in inverse proportion to the importance of the subject; Liberty Park involves the environmental design of one of the prime geographic sites of the region — or for that matter, anywhere — and the local, regional and national impact of a carefully and quite beautifully planned open space development. What is evident in both the plan itself and the understanding of its potential effect on everything around it, from the quality of life in Jersey City on one shore to the future of Battery Park City on the other shore, is, in a word — that very unpopular word — vision.

But the plan is not visionary. Some elements are being finished now, and sufficient money is in hand for the phases already under way. In such a large undertaking, future phases will depend on New Jersey's skill at obtaining matching Federal funds for state funds already raised in two Greenacres bond issues, and in working its way through the agencies and regulations where funds are available. That is a challenging, but not impossible task, involving politics and compromises. It is made easier by the progress already visible on a detailed plan of quality and utility, which is designed to be carried out in realistic, incremental stages.

Consider, first, the site: 800 acres on the water edge of the New Jersey side of New York Harbor, directly facing two national monuments, the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, with spectacular views of the Lower Manhattan skyline, the port's great bridges and the sweep of the bay. No more dramatic vista exists anywhere.

Consider, also, that this is to be a waterfront park in the heart of the heavily populated New York-New Jersey metropolitan region. And that it is at least the size of New York's Central Park, with equivalent powers of dramatic land transformation, and equal significance for future generations. In addition to restful, green open space for an urban constituency, there will be active recreation areas that use both land and water facilities. Historic preservation, in the recycling of an existing, unused railroad terminal for an information center and public events, further enriches the mix.

Not least, in looking at this plan, one is struck by the parallel opportunity on the New York side of the harbor that would be provided by the proper design of the embattled Westway, which, presently, is suffering from highway backlash, political paranoia and obstructionism for its own sake. What is most noticeable, through all the bitter controversy, is that vision is conspicuously lacking. It is not just today or tomorrow that is of concern, but the extensive, beneficial linking of large-scale cause and effect, of design and development that is being ignored. This, of course, is planning, which is currently as unfashionable as vision.

Most of the 800 acres of Liberty Park are now desolate landfill, another surreal New Jersey landscape of sea grass, weeds and trash. About 32 acres of this landfill have already been successfully transformed by the plan. Carried out with Bicentennial funds for the Bicentennial celebration in 1976, the newly landscaped area attracted huge crowds for the harbor fireworks, and the crowds have continued to come. This has now become the most popular park in New Jersey.

Liberty Park is a new kind of park, which strives not only for pastoral beauty and waterfront pleasures, but for a balance of environmental, ecological, recreational and cul-
Continued on Page 36

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

New Breed

Continued from Page 33

tural concerns. Like everything else, open space design has become much more sensitive and sophisticated, and more responsive to a variety of complex factors and needs. This approach builds on Olmsted's superb understanding of the artfully bucolic that combined the refreshment of nature with simple social activities. It goes beyond the large-scale recreation areas and trees and playing fields of the Moses era, although it is good to remember that the great park-beaches were visionary in their day.

The architects of Liberty Park, like Olmsted, will also create an artful landscape. The earth will be built up sculpturally for a stone-edged embankment that will form a tree-lined, crescent-shaped promenade about a mile-and-a-half long, or a 30-minute walk, along the water. This curve visually embraces the features of the harbor in a stunning composition that extends the meaning of landscape in a significant way.

Behind Liberty Walk, as the promenade will be called, the landfill will be turned into a naturalistic green park threaded with walks and bicycle paths, with a series of lagoons created for boating. The southern section of this 500-acre area will be kept as a wetland preserve. Part way along the walk will be an amphitheater facing Ellis Island

and the Statue of Liberty, for watching sound and light shows or harbor fireworks, or just enjoying the natural drama of the spectacular view.

At the northern end of the site, the abandoned 19th-century Maritime Rail Terminal, a Flemish Renaissance structure of brick and iron, is undergoing restoration now, with part of it expected to be functioning as an information center next spring. The southern end, which contains the Overlook finished in 1976, will have a marina and extended embankment. Between the park and the New Jersey Expressway bordering adjoining city neighborhoods, an area called the Uplands is intended to be the bridge connecting the two, serving largely local needs.

This park deals with everything from earthworks to ecology. In the words of its chief designer, Robert Geddes, it combines architectural form, social content and natural environment for a public urban landscape.

Federal-state talks are in process now for the park's key element — the crescent embankment. Delicate negotiations are needed for the required permits from such agencies as the Fish and Wildlife Services of the Department of the Interior and the United States Corps of Engineers. Equally delicate is the amount of money to come from New Jersey's Greenacres bond, meant for statewide use, although Liberty Park clearly serves the entire state and region. After the crescent is built the other pieces can fall naturally into place.

By presenting a plan like this, instead of chasing the rampant trendiness of a dubious avant-garde in a misguided attempt to lead the cultural rat pack, the Museum of Modern Art puts itself once again on the cutting edge of the future, and in the center of the action. That is an admirable way for the museum to mark its 50th anniversary. ■