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INFRASTRUCTURE ISSUE

# PARKS AS INFRASTRUCTURE AND TRANSPORTATION

By Claire Weisz, FAIA



>> Photos courtesy of WXY with Albert Vecerka/Esto



“Today’s parks need to do much more: build infrastructure, provide connectivity and increase resilience—as well as offer urbanites of all ages and abilities the opportunity for exercise.”

>> At first blush it would seem incongruous to present two park projects in a publication focused on infrastructure and transportation. But that is, in fact, how we approached two very different park designs—as opportunities to resolve a host of infrastructure issues and to facilitate resilience and connectivity.

The historic purpose—and one might argue the platonic ideal—of a park was to provide respite from urban life. They were envisioned as singular works of art, intentionally designed as islands unto themselves with the primary objective of offering fresh air, green space and serenity to people who were not expected to engage in activities any more strenuous than promenading and picnicking.

But the dirty, industrial city in which the historic park movement was born is no longer the context.

It is not enough for parks to exist as single-use islands of tranquility. Today’s parks need to do much more: build infrastructure, provide connectivity and increase resilience—as well as offer urbanites of all ages and abilities the opportunity for exercise. When people were toiling away in factories for twelve hours a day, exercising outdoors was anathema to anyone’s concept of downtime. But by providing non-auto transportation, a park system becomes a place for moderate to rigorous activity—which, given the state of public health, should no longer be considered an amenity any more than transportation and infrastructure are.

So, while the Rockaway Boardwalk and Brooklyn Strand look like parks, they are in fact key pieces of infrastructure specifically designed to create economically vibrant places through resilience and connectivity. >> continued on next page

## The Rockaway Boardwalk

In the wake of Hurricane Sandy, NYC Parks and the NYC Economic Development Corporation commissioned WXY to rebuild the Rockaway Boardwalk and to develop a conceptual plan to improve existing parks across the peninsula. Combining both of these efforts into a unified effort speaks to the importance of not just rebuilding, but rebuilding better. The boardwalk and larger conceptual plan uniquely integrate resiliency, recreation and economic development by putting infrastructure and connectivity at the very heart of the design.

Because the Rockaways are comprised of distinct neighborhoods which are connected by the peninsula's shoreline, the new boardwalk design responds to the immediate context of these neighborhoods. The newly designed access points together with a unique wayfinding system clarify and improve the boardwalks' circulation. This is critical, as the boardwalk is the Rockaways "Main Street," which provides every function of a typical Main Street by connecting communities while providing neutral space for economic activity and socializing.

Unlike most Main Streets, however, the boardwalk also provides another



>> Photos courtesy of WXY with Albert Vecerka/Esto

critical function: a protective barrier between the ocean and the neighborhoods, which were devastated by Hurricane Sandy. The new reinforced concrete boardwalk is elevated above the 100-year floodplain, and is supplemented with over four and a half miles of retaining walls and planted sand dunes. This infrastructure mediates the transition between the ground elevation of the park space and the new elevated boardwalk, conceals the baffle wall underneath the boardwalk and serves as the first line of defense during storms.

But let us not forget that it is also a park, and parks fundamentally succeed in their ability to attract human beings with thoughtful design. To that end, the boardwalk is framed by graceful steel railings and contemporary bench seating. The 40-foot sand-colored concrete planks are speckled with colored glass and cast in waves, mirroring the sinuous coastline. In the evening, "glow-in-the-dark" aggregate embedded in the blue planks evokes the bioluminescence in the ocean.

As the longest and largest resiliency project completed to date by the city of New York, the Rockaway Boardwalk ushers in a new approach to coastal infrastructure in the era of climate change.

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>> Photos courtesy of WXY



### The Brooklyn Strand Urban Design Action Plan

In July 2014, Mayor Bill de Blasio announced a series of initiatives meant to further the successful growth of Downtown Brooklyn into a thriving, 21st century Downtown. The vitality experienced on the streets is the result of new economic opportunities that come from the revitalized areas from Downtown, to DUMBO (short for Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass) where high-tech firms have taken root, and the Brooklyn Navy Yard, which has home to growing innovative manufacturing companies.

But when we asked engaged Brooklynites about their concerns, many people wanted to know why they could not have better connected public space and why Brooklyn Bridge Park was so hard to get to. Moreover, the “gateways” into the center of Brooklyn are hidden under the infrastructure connecting the 1950’s era interchanges to the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges. What was originally planned by Robert Moses as a glorious entry for automobiles into Brooklyn’s Civic Center never came to fruition. Fragments of the past stayed and people improvised routes around the underside of elevated structures and off ramps.

In studying the kinds of barriers that were created when the expressway and the civic center were initially conceived, it became clear that parts of these grand plans were then changed and compromised. Spaces that are basically mounded earth or fences lie on top of what used to be continuous streets or squares. Rethinking spaces around infrastructure and improving universal access across the city creates design opportunities for the landscape of the city.



>> Photos courtesy of WXY

We developed strategies, like the Gateway to Brooklyn and Trinity Park concepts, for unlocking what is now large areas of highway buffer space into large, connected and compelling open spaces. The Gateway to Brooklyn action plan, for example, we show how Cadman Plaza East and the level of the concrete pedestrian walkway off the Bridge is almost at the same grade. These could be connected by spanning over part of the road and off-ramp to provide both better access as well as greater safety for pedestrians who today have to dodge traffic at Cadman Plaza West.

So what began as a limited scope to take a look at the existing parks quickly expanded into a simple but powerful framework: A series of disparate parks, plazas, and greenways could reconnect downtown (the office sector), DUMBO (the tech hub), the Navy Yard (innovative manufacturing) and the waterfront (recreation) to fulfill Brooklyn’s potential as one of the most dynamic urban innovation centers in the world. That is the power of urban park design when it is thought of as a system rather than a single-use green space.

*Claire Weisz, FAIA, is an architect and urbanist, and a founding principal of WXY. With her partners, Mark Yoes, Layng Pew, and Adam Lubinsky, Claire focuses on innovative approaches to public space, structures, and cities. WXY has received the League Prize from the Architectural League of New York, as well as being selected as one of the League’s Emerging Voices practices in 2011, in addition to numerous awards from AIA National, AIANY, and the American Planning Association.*

*WXY architecture and urban planning is an award-winning multi-disciplinary practice specializing in the realization of urban design, planning and architectural solutions in challenging contexts. Focused on innovative approaches to public space, structures and urban issues, the firm’s work engages both site-specific design and planning at multiple scales. The firm’s commissions are in collaboration with community-based, public authority, and private clients.*

