



# landscape architecture

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS 12/2016 US\$17/CAN\$9

**New York's New Edges**  
Nancy Owens at Fort Totten

MVVA by the Hudson  
Rockwell Group's Crazy Playground  
New Life for Mafia Blocks



**N**O PLACE BETTER EPTOMIZES the complexities and contradictions in humankind's relations with nature than the postindustrial landscape. That certainly is the case in the recently completed Chelsea Cove section of New York City's Hudson River Park designed by Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates (MVVA). Not only does this design successfully deal with extremely challenging site conditions, it also can be viewed as an example of the exuberant eclecticism that Robert Venturi called for in the mid-1960s.



# ON THE NEW WATERFRONT

*Around two Manhattan piers, Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates takes an explosion of social life to the Hudson River's edge.*

BY ALEX ULAM



CHELSEA COVE IS LOCATED at the former site of the B&O Freight Terminal, which abandoned the area decades ago. Rebuilt shipping piers form the actual “cove” of this approximately eight-acre section of Hudson River Park. After the Clean Water Act was passed in the early 1970s and the river got cleaned up, microorganisms returned and began to eat away at the original piers’ pilings. But as the water became cleaner, the abandoned piers along this part of the Hudson River also became the sheltering ground for striped bass and other kinds of fish. In fact, the preservation of this fish habitat became such a critical issue that it was pivotal in the defeat of Westway, a project that would have involved several hundred acres of landfill, a new six-lane roadway, and thousands of new housing units along the Hudson River. That proposed project in the 1980s was slated for much of the land and water that today comprise Hudson River Park. In the late 1990s, some of the same environmentalists and community leaders behind the defeat of Westway pressed to have the park built instead.

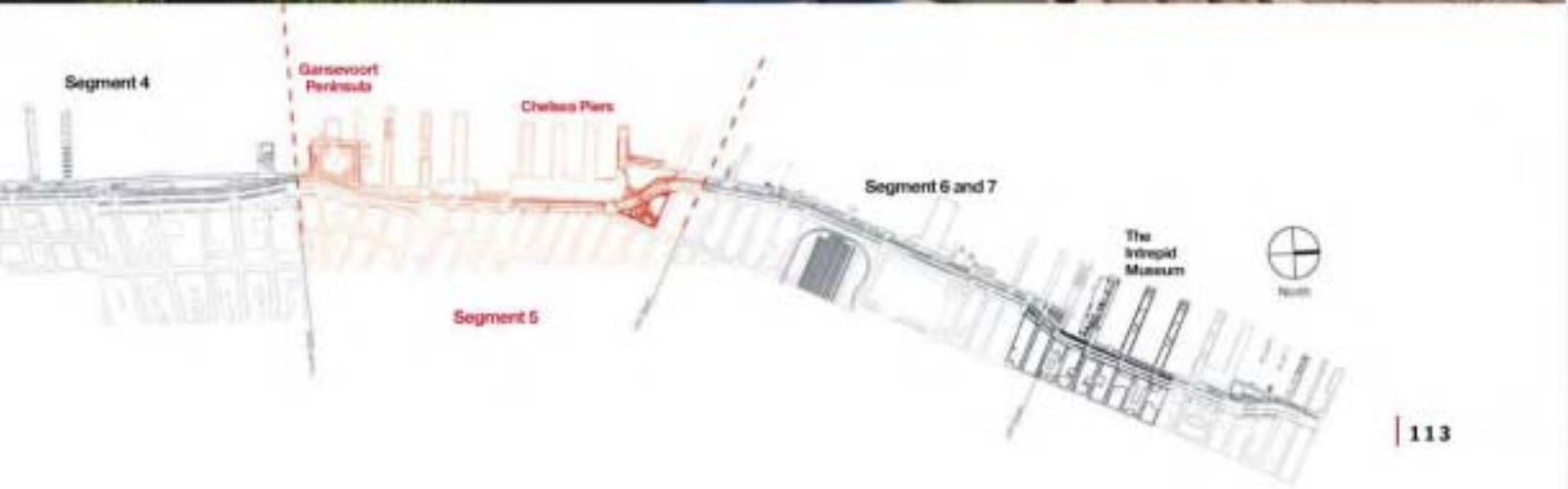
Chelsea Cove was designed in 2002, but before it could be built, the first order of business was to protect the fish habitat under the moldering piers. And the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which regulates bulkhead and pier lines along the nation’s waterways, required that the piers be rebuilt according to their original dimensions. Therefore the very shape of this piece of property was determined by a need to protect a wildlife habitat formed by an industrial structure that had outlived its original purpose and was co-opted, as it were, by nature.

ELIZABETH FELDZELK, TOP; COURTESY MERRA BOSTON

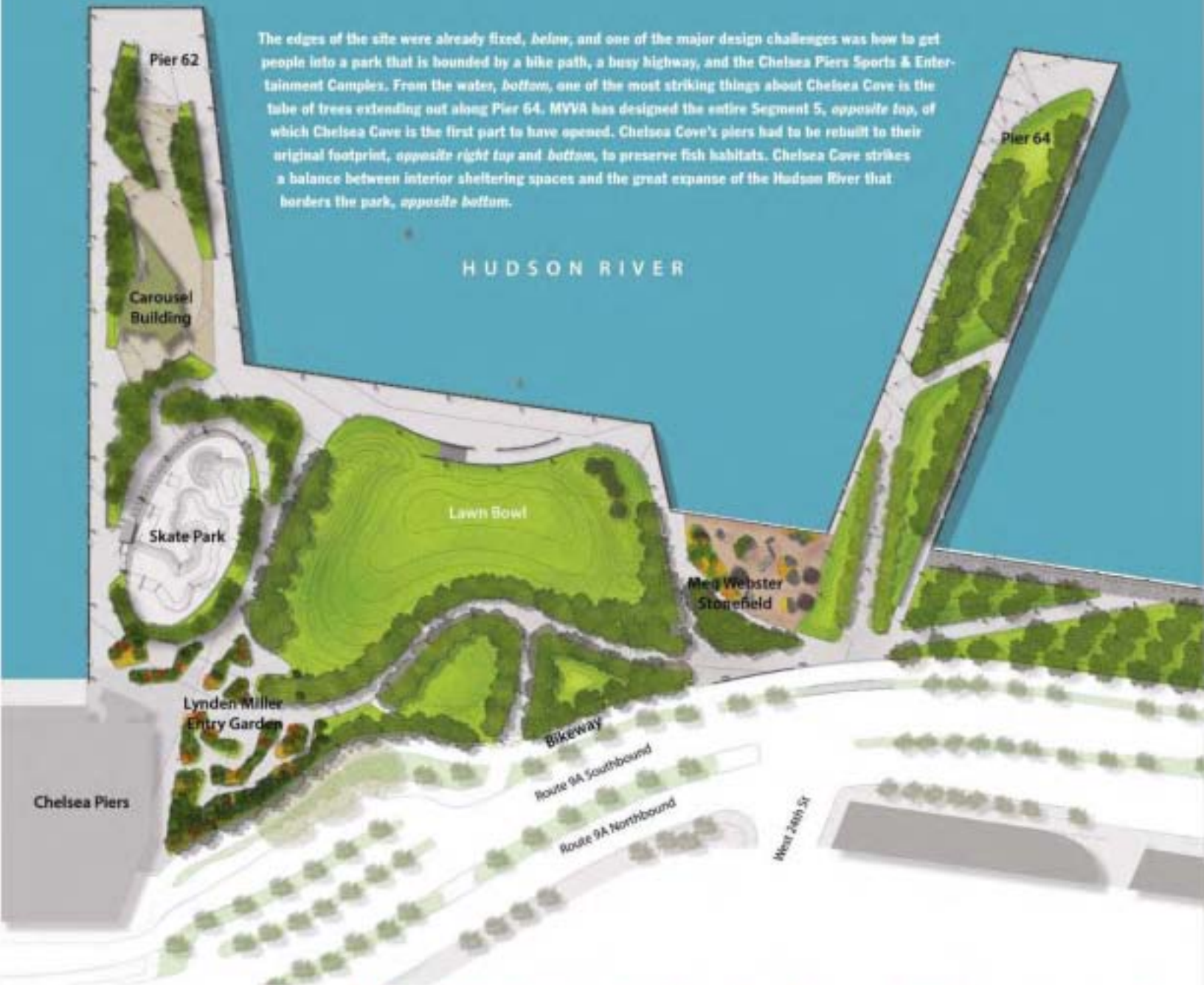


**The Lawn Bowl, with its extreme slopes, above, is reminiscent of Prospect Park’s Long Meadow. Hudson River Park runs for almost five miles, right, from Battery Park City in Lower Manhattan up to West 59th Street.**





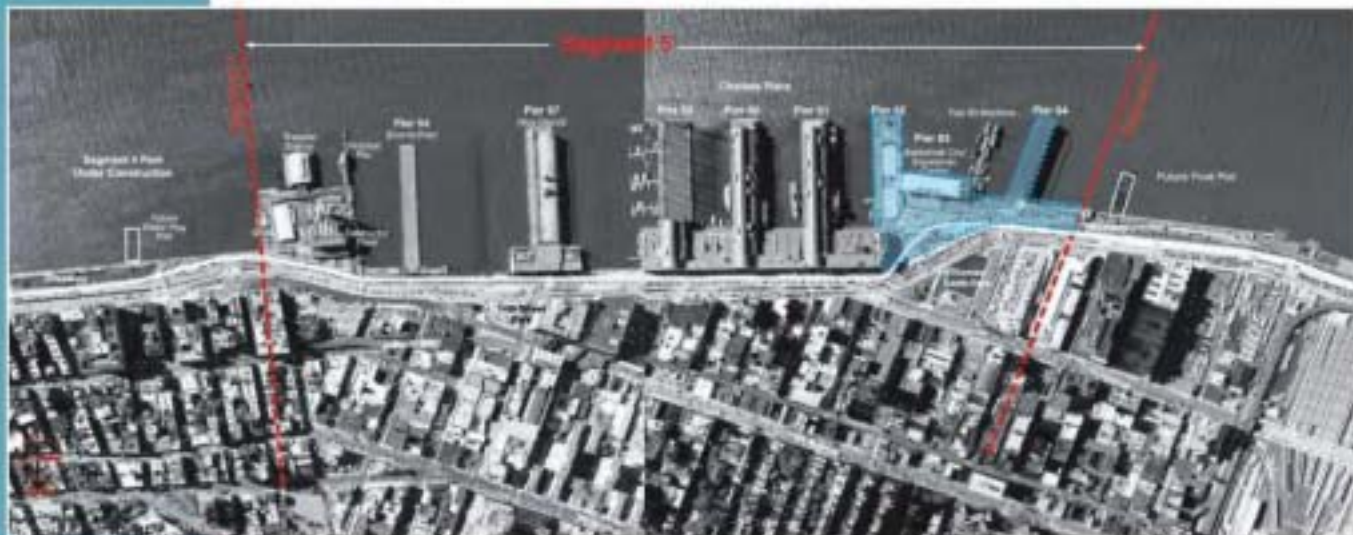
The edges of the site were already fixed, below, and one of the major design challenges was how to get people into a park that is bounded by a bike path, a busy highway, and the Chelsea Piers Sports & Entertainment Complex. From the water, below, one of the most striking things about Chelsea Cove is the tube of trees extending out along Pier 64. MVVA has designed the entire Segment 5, opposite top, of which Chelsea Cove is the first part to have opened. Chelsea Cove's piers had to be rebuilt to their original footprint, opposite right top and bottom, to preserve fish habitats. Chelsea Cove strikes a balance between interior sheltering spaces and the great expanse of the Hudson River that borders the park, opposite bottom.



Some of the park's features hark back to the great 19th-century parks



COURTESY MVVA



Now this once-gritty waterfront has been transformed into a romantic-style landscape with verdant lawns, groves of trees, and a formal flower garden of rosebushes and purple *Nepeta* encased in concrete planters. The landscape grows even more fantastic along some of the winding pathways that approach the riverfront, where you encounter elements that summon impressions of being at the seashore. Classic beach plants such as beach plum, bayberry, and honeylocust line a riverfront esplanade composed of sand-colored granite blocks. And out on Pier 62 there are even sections of wooden boardwalk.

Simulacra are celebrated at Chelsea Cove. Some sections of granite pavers are in darker shades than the rest to create simulated shadows that break up the otherwise large expanses of paving. At Pier 63, which is situated parallel with the bulkhead (the retaining wall that runs along the river's edge), long stone blocks have been arranged in a scattered fashion to mimic the way logs look when they wash ashore. Although driftwood was the original inspiration, using actual logs would have "been too literal," says Matthew Urbanski, a partner at MVVA, whose role in the project Michael Van Valkenburgh, FASLA,



designed by Frederick Law Olmsted.

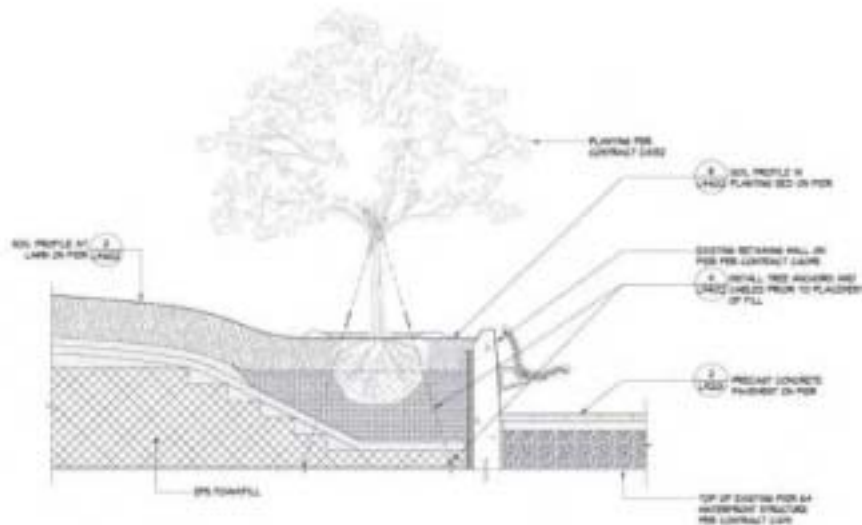
ILLUSTRATION: MVVA. TOP PHOTO: © 2015 ALEX & SPACER/ISTOCKPHOTO. BOTTOM

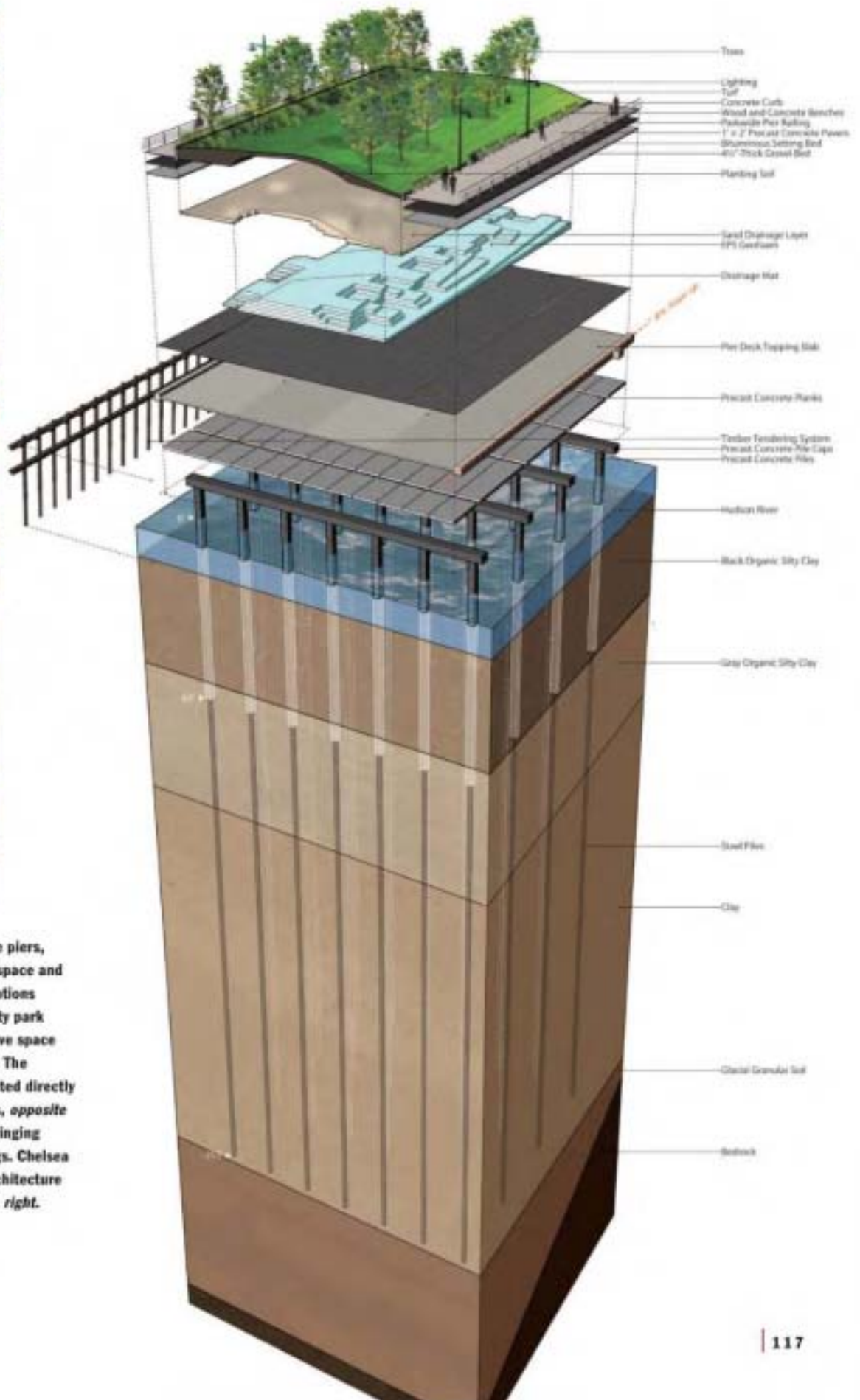




calls “bigger than mine.” In other places, the distinction between the upland areas and the cove’s piers has been erased with artful landscape architecture. For example, on Pier 64, the cove’s northernmost pier, a grassy slope lined with a row of trees descends into the upland area, creating the illusion that the pier is just an extension of the landmass.

Although this wedge-shaped piece of land is relatively small, many different types of places are here—including areas where you can practice extreme sports as well as spots where you can take a nap. Some of the park’s features hark back to the great 19th-century parks designed by Frederick Law Olmsted. The winding pathways and, in particular, the expansive bowl-shaped lawn are reminiscent of the Long Meadow in Brooklyn’s Prospect Park.





ELIZABETH FRIEDELIA TOP COURTESY NYCHA RIGHT AND OPPOSITE BOTTOM

Long wooden benches on the piers, above, expand the sense of space and also provide more seating options than traditional New York City park benches, which generally have space for only two or three people. The benches on the piers are bolted directly into concrete retaining walls, opposite bottom, saving space and bringing people closer to the plantings. Chelsea Cove is both a landscape architecture and an engineering triumph, right.



Indeed, with its variety of programs and environments, Chelsea Cove may also be seen as a contemporary interpretation of one of Olmsted's parks in miniature. At one entrance beneath the garish neon sign of the adjacent Chelsea Piers Sports & Entertainment Complex, a formal flower garden, with picnic tables designed by the horticulturist Lynden Miller, serves as a transition area into the park. In the middle of Chelsea Cove, overlooking the water, is a sculpture garden designed by the artist Meg Webster. Much of Pier 62 is oriented toward active users. Here a carousel is stocked with animal figurines of various species that are found in Hudson River Valley. And near the carousel, enclosed in a cage, is a state-of-the-art skateboard park, designed by California

Skateparks and the SITE Design Group, where skateboarders can catch some serious air.

One thing that makes Chelsea Cove's layout particularly exciting is that the elements are arranged so that no matter where you stand it is impossible to get an overview or even a sense of what this relatively small park is all about. The MVVA design creates a sense of mystery for the visitor—you know something special will be discovered behind that next bend in the path, and in places you are teased by a partial view through a gap in trees or a depression in one of the hills. But the undulating landscape and its winding pathways force you to slow down and experience the park's many attractions one at a time.

A sculpture garden by the artist Meg Webster features massive upright stones rather than representational works.



Many sculptures in New York City's park system are representations of heroic figures from the past. However, Chelsea Cove's abstract sculpture garden by the artist Meg Webster, left, creates a sense of mystery. Webster's sculpture garden also provides places to play, above.

Many contemporary parks built atop formerly industrial sites are designed to commemorate a place's man-made or natural history. But most visitors probably do not realize that this place was once part of a busy industrial waterfront. Aside from the footprint of the piers, there are few traces of or allusions to Chelsea Cove's past. Van Valkenburgh says he finds the current trend of alluding to a site's cultural history "a little cloying," and he attributes this sensibility in part to his having lived so many years in Boston, "where there is this talk about Little Bo Peep and the Ducklings and the Freedom Trail." And in regard to the fad for planting indigenous plants, "I am over that," he says. "I think that the city is about heterogeneity.... If a plant is going to grow well

on the beach in Japan, it is going to grow well on the beach in New York."

Chelsea Cove is the latest addition to Hudson River Park, which has been referred to as Manhattan's most significant new park since Central Park was built in the 19th century. Sandwiched between the West Side Highway and the Hudson River, the entire 550-acre park (450 acres of which is composed of water) stretches from Battery Park City in Lower Manhattan up to 59th Street. This former working waterfront became parkland in 2001, and the new park has been the catalyst for a real estate boom along the waterfront where architects such as Richard Meier, Jean Nouvel, and Frank Gehry have designed buildings.

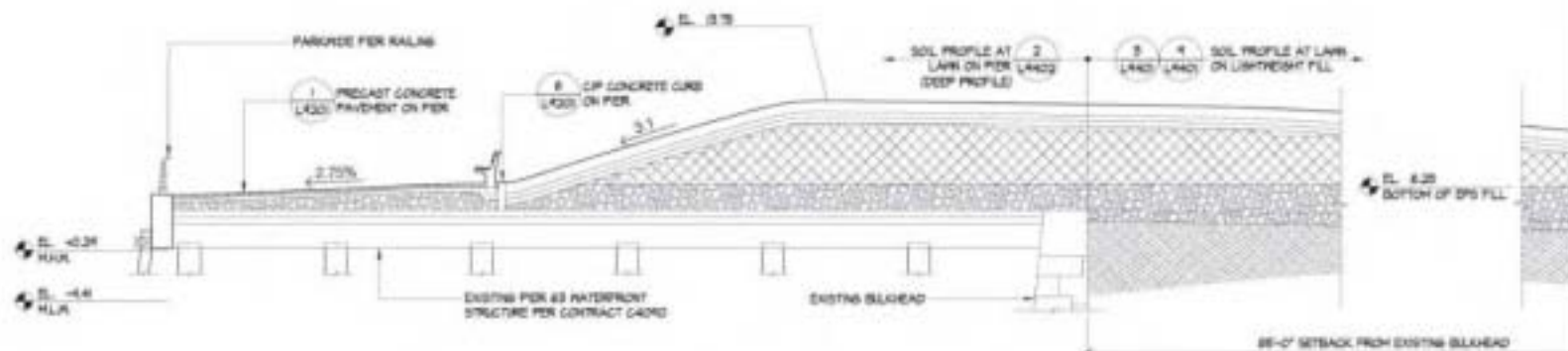


The pronounced rise of the Lawn Bowl introduces a vertical element to Chelsea Cove, here, which helps divide up and add a layer of complexity to a site that was flat before the park was built. The Lawn Bowl, below, seamlessly bridges bulkhead and pier lines. Shade trees were placed around the borders of the lawn, opposite, to avoid clogging up what is in actually a rather small amount of open space.

The park is being developed in seven different segments, and it has become a veritable outdoor gallery of work by some of the profession's leading talents. Matthews Nielsen, Abel Bainnson Butz, and a team consisting of architect Richard Dattner & Partners and the Miceli Kulik Williams Joint Venture have designed the other sections. MVVA is designing the whole of the approximately 16-acre Segment 5, which includes Piers 54, 56, 58, Gansevoort Peninsula, and Chelsea Cove—the first section to open. To give some degree of uniformity to the different segments, the

master plan for the entire Hudson River Park mandates a standard design vocabulary along the waterfront esplanade that runs the length of the park. This requirement consists of a riverfront esplanade with granite pavers, an art deco-style railing, and the World's Fair-style benches that are found in many New York City parks. However, in the upland areas and along the piers, the landscape architects who design in Hudson River Park have been given freer creative rein than they generally are accorded in a typical city park. They also have much bigger budgets: Chelsea Cove

ELIZABETH FELLELLA, TOP COURTESY  
MVVA BOTTOM





You're forced to slow down  
by the undulating landscape  
and winding pathways.



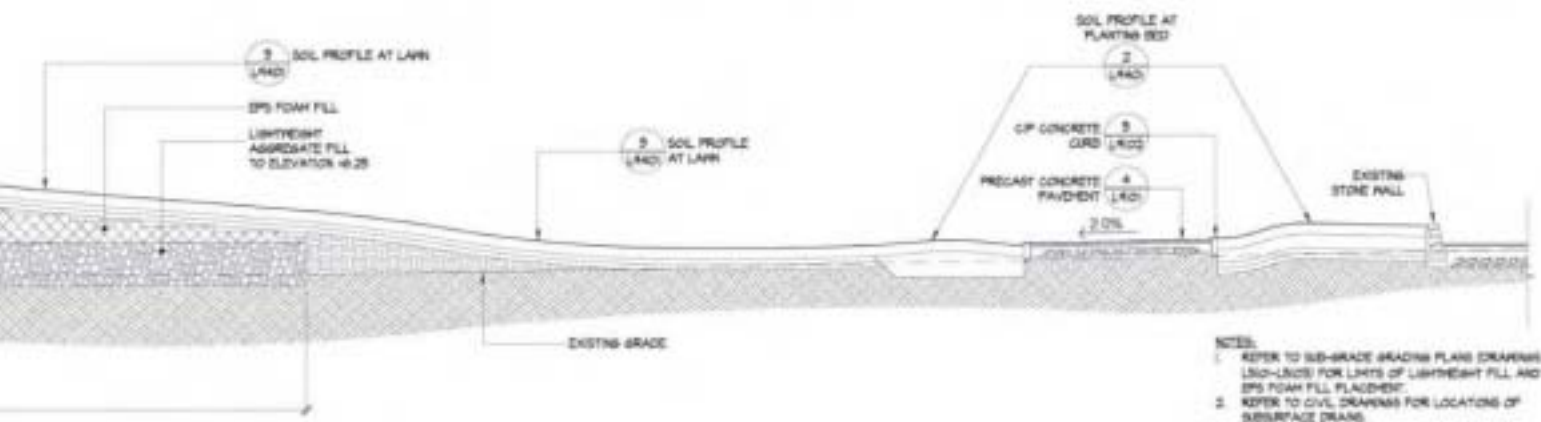
cost \$73 million to design and build, or about \$8 million an acre on average.

Hudson River Park is one of a handful of parks in New York City being developed under a new model that is gaining popularity in municipalities across the country—the so-called public-private partnership. In this case, the park's design, maintenance, and governance are under the charge of an entity called the Hudson River Park Trust, whose board members are appointed by both the New York state governor and the New York City may-

or. And instead of tax dollars sustaining it, the park's maintenance comes from long-term tenants who rent out large portions of the park, such as the Chelsea Piers Sports & Entertainment Complex, situated in enormous gray warehouse buildings that loom over the southern section of Chelsea Cove.

New York City Department of Parks & Recreation Commissioner Adrian Benepe, Honorary ASLA, who is a board member of the Hudson River Park Trust, says the trust can afford to be bolder than the city's parks department when it comes to design because

ELIZABETH FELLELLA





Skateboarders are screened off from the rest of the park with landscaping and a fence, here. The edges of the preexisting bike path, which runs along the border of Chelsea Cove, below, were planted with shade trees by MVVA. The Lynden Miller garden with its winding pathways, opposite, serves as a transition area from the adjacent roadways and the bustle of Chelsea Piers to the rest of the park.

## The park's energy levels vary greatly, given Lynden Miller's lush Entry Garden, a frantic,



it is not constrained by the large maintenance operations that require a certain level of standardization in park furniture and plantings. "It can be problematic to have a sort of Soviet-style government bureaucracy and monopoly overseeing all of the parks," Benepe says, referring to the city agency he oversees. "There are advantages because you have some type of continuity and ease of maintenance, but you can get visual lockjaw when you sort of say

this and only this style will apply to parks across the city. And I think that it is important to challenge notions about what parks can look like in the 21st century."

Still, the need to accommodate the park's tenants has resulted in compromises to the park user experience. One of the biggest challenges the MVVA team faced was how to design a park entrance in front of the Chelsea Piers complex, which is decked out with large colored signs and a large streaming video screen that advertises the complex's activities. In addition to visually overwhelming the border of Chelsea Cove, the enormous Chelsea Piers complex has a busy three-lane service road located near the entrance to the Lynden Miller garden. To access the Chelsea Cove section from the southern part of Hudson River Park, park visitors must either walk along a narrow sidewalk abutting the Chelsea Piers service road or walk right through the enormous parking lots within the complex's buildings. "It is a drag as a park user to go a quarter of a mile through a building," says Van Valkenburgh. "The three-lane thing needs to be rethought, because the park deserves a daylighted connection on that side, even if it is just a broad sidewalk."

Although the MVVA design takes some of its cues from Olmsted, whose imprint remains heavy on the New York City park system, Chelsea Cove tells its story in a contemporary design vocabulary. Aside from the uniform features along the esplanade



## first-rate skatepark, and a leisurely bike path.

that were mandated by the trust, Chelsea Cove is free of the historicist park furniture typically found in a postmodern landscape. Here, black light fixtures are suspended from long black cables that stretch from poles; at night, the lamps look as though they are floating in the air. And instead of representational statuary, Meg Webster's sculpture garden, set in a gray, sandy area with an arrangement of upright massive stones around beds of flowers, looks as though it was designed for a Druid ritual.

As in any well-designed park, many of Chelsea Cove's features are designed for both aesthetic effect and functionality. An example is the long wooden benches on the piers. By running lengthwise parallel with the piers, the bench slats make the piers seem even longer than they really are. And doing away with armrests allows park visitors more seating options—they don't have to sit directly next to a stranger on a bench made for two or three people.

But surely one of the most striking things about Chelsea Cove's design is how it alludes to the work of Olmsted—a figure that many landscape architects from Van Valkenburgh's generation have spent their careers rebelling against either with rectilinear landscapes or through an emphasis on gritty postindustrial artifacts.

"Like everybody who grew up trained as a modernist," Van Valkenburgh says, "I think it is fair to say that even 20 years ago, I would have been aghast that people draw any formal analogies to

### Partial Plant List

- Amelanchier canadensis* • Canadian serviceberry
- Betula nigra* • River birch
- Carex bicknellii* • Bicknell's sedge
- Carex pensylvanica* • Pennsylvania sedge
- Cedrus deodara* • Deodar cedar
- Cornus alba 'Elegantissima'* • Variegated red twig dogwood
- Cornus sanguinea* 'Midwinter Fire' • Bloodtwig dogwood
- Cornus sericea* 'Cardinal' • Cardinal redberry dogwood
- Oboloba thianthus* var. *inermis* 'Skyline' • Skyline honeysuckle (single and multiflorated)
- Gymnocladus dioica* • Kentucky coffeetree
- Ilex glabra 'Compacta'* • Compacta inkberry
- Ilex verticillata* • Common winterberry
- Miscanthus sinensis 'Gracillimus'* • Chinese silvergrass
- Myrica pensylvanica* • Northern bayberry
- Nyssa sylvatica* • Blackgum
- Panicum alopecuroides* • Chinese fountaingrass
- Pinus bungeana* • Bunge's pine
- Prunus maritima* • Beach plum
- Prunus serotina* • Black cherry
- Quercus robur* • English oak
- Rhus aromatica* • Fragrant sumac
- Robinia pseudoacacia* • Black locust
- Rosa rugosa* • Rugosa rose
- Salix alba 'Nivalis'* • Golden weeping willow
- Sarcococca hookeriana* var. *humilis* • Christmas box



The wooden boardwalk area at the end of the piers adds to the beach theme that is referenced in other elements found in this area, such as the beach plantings and the sand-colored granite pavers.



Olmsted—there would be something passé. How could you be happy that someone is comparing you to romanticism? But I think that this has been one of the big blunders of modern landscape architecture—and I don't know whether it is fair for me to generalize, but for the second half of the 20th century, it was certainly a rampant concern among landscape architects that their work would be judged on the formal grounds of architecture. Whereas what we have seen emerge with the redefinition of ecology is that landscape architecture has become emancipated from architecture.”

Something different is happening here. Chelsea Cove has an intrinsic landscape quality that one does not find in works of landscape architecture that are oriented toward engaging the city's postindustrial decline. Yes, you are still in New York, but Chelsea Cove is a true escape from the exigencies of the adjacent roadways where the emphasis is on moving people and automobiles. The deep bowl shape of the cove's central lawn excites the eye, but it also provides a buffer against the blur and whirl of the traffic racing down the adjacent West Side highway. A curved pathway bends not just as a “romantic” gesture, but it also offers a whole range of perspectives—many of them illusory. This place is a fantasyland where the objective is to entertain and delight. Rather than resurrecting historicist motifs or depending upon artifacts to make its point, Chelsea Cove taps into deeply rooted urban landscape traditions.

**PROJECT CREDITS** **Client:** Hudson River Park Trust, New York (Connie Fishman, president; Marc Bodewyn, vice president, design and construction). **Landscape architect/lead designer:** Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates Inc. Landscape Architects, Brooklyn, New York. **Geotechnical and marine engineer:** Mueser Rutledge Consulting Engineers, New York. **Architect (Carousel Building):** CR Studio Architects PC, New York. **Architect (West 26th Street Maintenance Building):** Beyer Blinder Belle Architects & Planners LLP, New York. **Civil engineer:** Maitra Associates PC, Somerset, New Jersey. **Structural engineer:** Ysrael A. Seinuk PC, New York. **Lighting designer:** U Lighting Inc., Sunnyside, New York. **Irrigation design:** Northern Designs LLC, North Haven, Connecticut. **Skatepark designer:** SITE Design Group Inc., Carlsbad, California. **Entry Garden design:** Lynden B. Miller Public Garden Design, New York. **Artist:** Meg Webster, New York.