

Weekend

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At Land's Edge, a Contentment of Light and Shape

By TONY HISS

SOUTH COVE, a three-acre, sea-shell-shaped public park on the Hudson River in Battery Park City, overflows with a quiet power so potent that first-time visitors can take the taste and feel of it home with them, and run it over in their minds, like a vivid childhood memory. A weekend visit to South Cove is as bracing and adventuresome as a walk across a wind-swept, unexplored sand dune, and at the same time it's cozy and private, and feels as utterly safe as an hour spent rocking back and forth on a favorite old back-porch swing.

There, you immediately encounter two familiar and opposite kinds of shoreline places that elsewhere in the region are bitterly at war with each other for final control of the coastline: an irregularly wandering, boulder-strewn, untrammeled natural seacoast, and a busy, built-up waterfront with a seawall, a boardwalk, a running jerry, an observation tower, a hump-backed bridge and benches.

In this one place both well-known shoreline forms have dutifully and breathakingly been superimposed on each other. The boulders, for instance, spill down a hillside covered with beach grass and wild roses and roll out halfway across an asphalt path, in a way that knits boulders and path together to create a new kind of water's edge that's at once so welcoming and so unexpected it

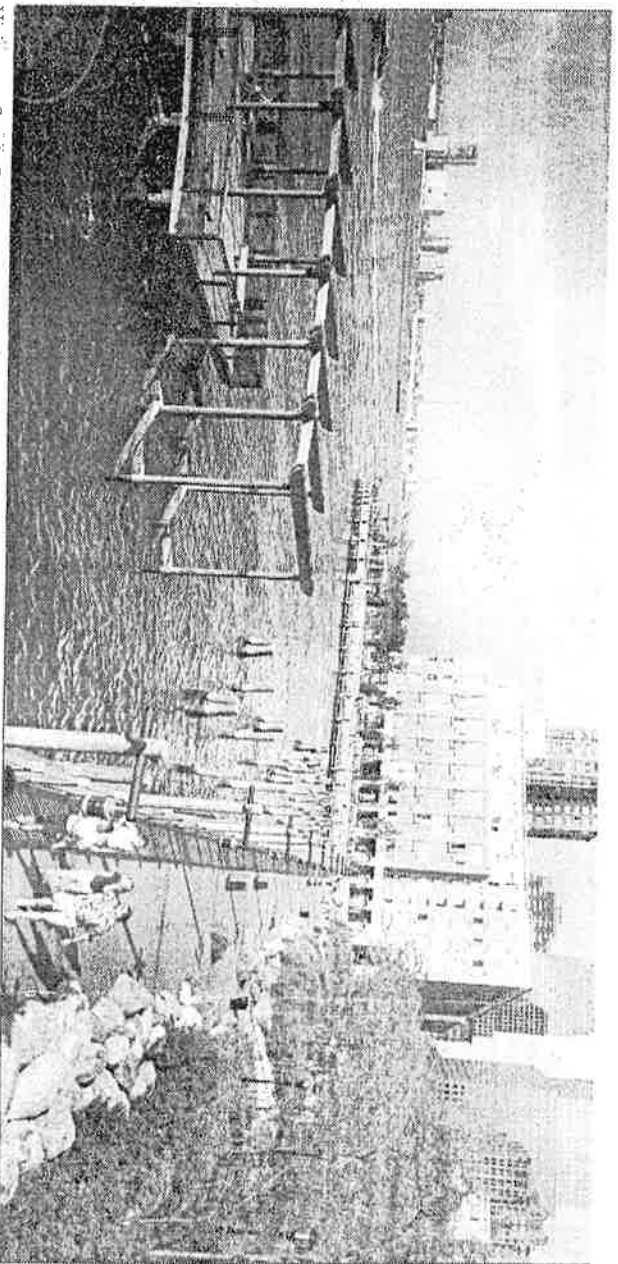
South Cove, a richly textured melding of city and river.

feels almost like a reunion with a long-lost friend you've never met before.

One achievement of South Cove winks into existence only after dark. Astonishingly, in a city where, according to one recent poll, 65 percent of the residents say they avoid going out alone at night as much tonight has been given to the care of nighttime visitors as to the needs of the daytime crowd. The daytime visitors include joggers, picnickers, sun-bathers, Roller Bladers, mothers with strollers, people in wheelchairs, people with problems to drink out, wedding parties, tourists and small boys leaping from rock to rock. It's young couples, mostly, who seek out the Cove on a weekend night. It's gaining a citywide reputation as a public place where you can have a *tête à tête* about the years ahead without paying \$80 a head for prix fixe nouvelle cuisine.

For them the Cove offers a romantic and spectacular free light show that looks almost like the sunset of a rainbow. The long straight track along the Cove's western edge — the watery part of the Cove is a roughly rectangular indentation in the Hudson River shoreline 360 feet long and up to 200





Visitors to South Cove enjoy a mix of shorelines and views that have been breathtakingly superimposed on one another.

Kenn Koper/Tickner Park Trust

South Cove, a Blend Of Site, Shape and Light

"They must get just as high the water as they possibly can without falling in. And there they stand — miles of them — leagues. Inlanders all, they come from lanes and alleys, streets and avenues — north, east, south, and west. Yet here they all unite."

Lure of the River

The Cove's guiding vision, by all accounts, has been an urgent, pent-up longing for contact with the waterfront that accumulated inside Mary Miss for 15 years: she had a studio downtown, not far north of Battery Park City, but in those days she couldn't get down to the river's bank, because, like the rest of us, she was cut off by fences, highways, warehouses and collapsing wharves.

Today the Cove is a place that's attractive to, and respected by, New Yorkers. At the same time, many parts of Battery Park City produce mixed feelings in many New York City residents, because to them the place seems something like never-never land: you never see graffiti on the walls, you never see little black circles of discarded chewing gum on the pavement, and any number of people have the sense that they will never, never be able to afford to live there.

South Cove doesn't just bring you so close to the river you can practically trail your arm in it. Out on the jetty, which sways in the wakes thrown ashore by passing speed-boats, you can also feel the river pushing against you through the soles of your feet. And, most gloriously, the

one of the boardwalk benches — you can see the reflections of all four colors stretch out next to each other on the surface of the inky-black river in long, parallel columns, undulating and shimmering, and never quite touching.

The last time my wife and I went down to the Cove to look at this display, about 11 P.M. on a mild fall Saturday, when we lifted our heads from the rainbow at our feet, we could see beyond it on the river a long white wake of light pointing to a gibbous moon high in the sky. Just beyond the outer edges of the river lights, over in New Jersey, were two clocks: the big old Colgate clock and the clock in the tower of the great chateau of the Jersey Central railway station. And slightly to the left, way down the river, we saw a pearl neck-

lace of lights outlining the top of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge; the fiery gold torch of the Statue of Liberty; and — something new — a friendly jack-o'-lantern face, made by the arched windows in the just reopened main hall over on Ellis Island.

The Cove lights and the river lights gleamed like fireworks upside down, and gliding silently through the middle of them came the silhouette of the De Witt Clinton, the big sidewheeler from the South Street Seaport, out for a late evening cruise.

Work of Art

The design of South Cove was a collaborative effort produced by a temporary partnership of the artist Mary Miss, the landscape architect Susan Child and the architect Stanton Eckstut, who was one of the two ar-

chitects who worked on the master plan for all of Battery Park City. This team was assembled by the Fine Arts Program at Battery Park City; officially, South Cove is listed on the books of the Battery Park City Authority as a work of art, not a park.

Forged and summoned into being during their four months of working with each other (and with several collaborators) was a more lasting partnership. They've given back to New Yorkers a sense of intimate companionship with the Hudson River that had been lost, it sometimes seems, ever since the mid-19th century.

"Mary-Dick" begins with a description of the thousands upon thousands of New Yorkers whom Melville saw flocking to the janitor's edge on Saturday afternoons in the 1850's.

river is no longer mute. A wooden lattice-work structure was created for the outer edge of the long, straight length of seawall and the wakes and the waves and the tides suck and slap and murmur and chop and splash and thump and crunch and hammer and burst against these wood beams in a way that seems to return and rebalance the city. South Cove works to "re-place" New York, as we might say, re-establishing its heritage as a river town.

Only two years after its opening, the Cove already seems part of the permanent New York, those places such as Central Park, or Carnegie Hall that are loved because they can permanently stretch our understanding of our connections to one another and to the world the city serves.

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feet wide — is lined with 15 wooden lampposts from which swing cobalt-blue glass ships lanterns. Below the lanterns, on the outer face of the seawall, are lavender running lights that also extend beyond this main-line straitaway. These veer back at a right angle toward the center of the river along the outer railings in front of the boardwalk on the north face of the Cove, and curve around under the semi-circular jetty that pushes out from the south shore.

Farther back from the shore are lampposts with white metal halide lights and orange high-pressure sodium lights. And — if you sit down on