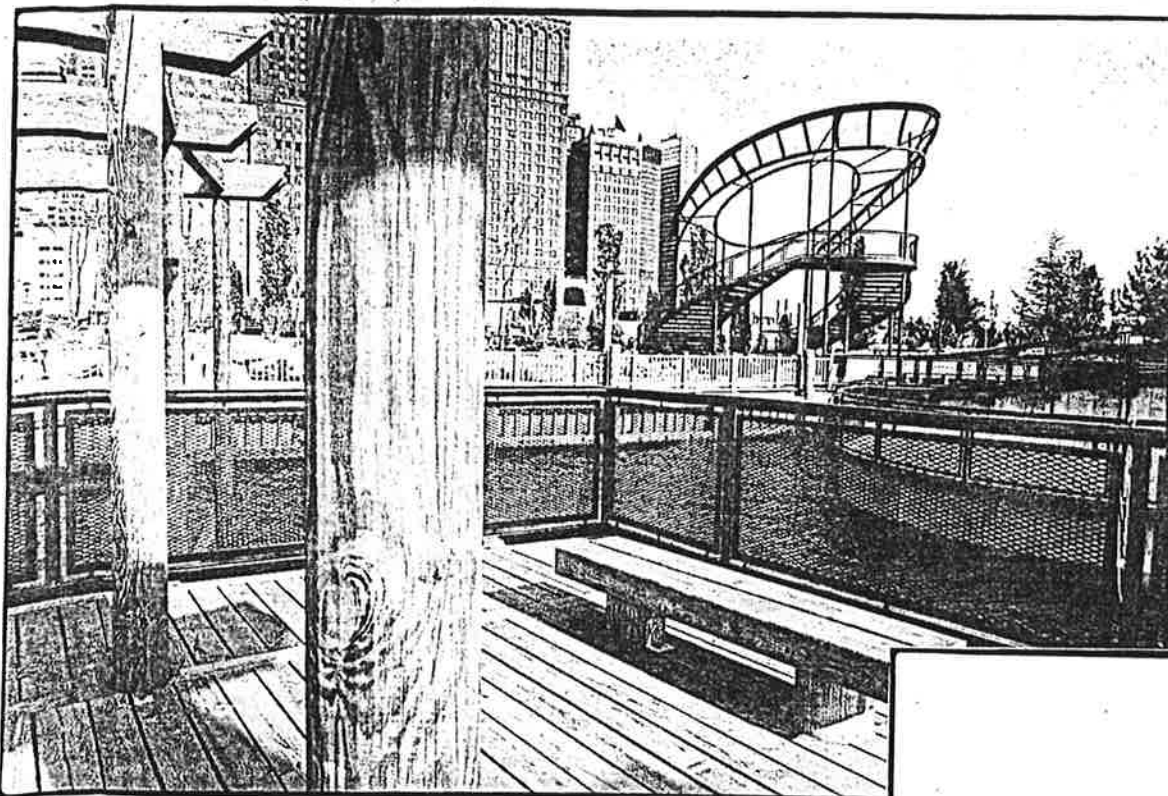


In the Waterfront

BY NANCY PRINCENTHAL



Public art, the kind urban viewers come upon in broad daylight with little or no warning, has not been big in New York. Other cities—Seattle, unofficial national site-work capital; Chicago; even refractory Philadelphia—have been more eager to embrace outdoor, full-scale, permanent artworks. Percent-for-art legislation that links new public construction to art commissions was introduced here only after at least 50 other localities had test-marketed it. To be sure, we've had plenty of fine contemporary outdoor art installations, from Wave Hill to Art on the Beach to Snug Harbor, as well as the work placed all over town by the Public Art Fund. But functional projects conceived for the long haul, with or without architects, have been scarce. Perhaps it's a question of real estate values. Or it could be that public art sounds too much like a populist enterprise, suitable for the Midwest and other places amenable to cultural consensus but unwelcome in a city where shared opinion is conceived accidentally, unwanted and unloved.

Enter the Fine Arts Program at Battery Park City. First announced over six years ago, part of a development scheme now celebrating its 20th anniversary and

Several of the Battery Park City proposals and models are on view through September 4 at the American Craft Museum (40 West 53rd Street) as part of an exhibition called "Architectural Art: Affirming the Design Relationship." Also, the entire 50-acre extent of the lower Hudson-front park system, including Battery Park and all of the BPC projects, through the North Park, are the subject of an exhibition at One World Financial Center called "New York's New Riverfront: The Many Parks of Battery Park City and Beyond," through June 3.

supported entirely by Battery Park City Authority and its tenants, this program is one of the most ambitious in the country. Six projects are now on the boards or completed (three originally planned have been scrapped), and more will soon be commissioned for the still-unbuilt North Park. Some were designed by artists working independently, others have involved artists, architects, and landscape architects working together from the start. Collaborative or not, all share a dedication to extra-aesthetic concerns. Use—not as in criticality but as in seat-

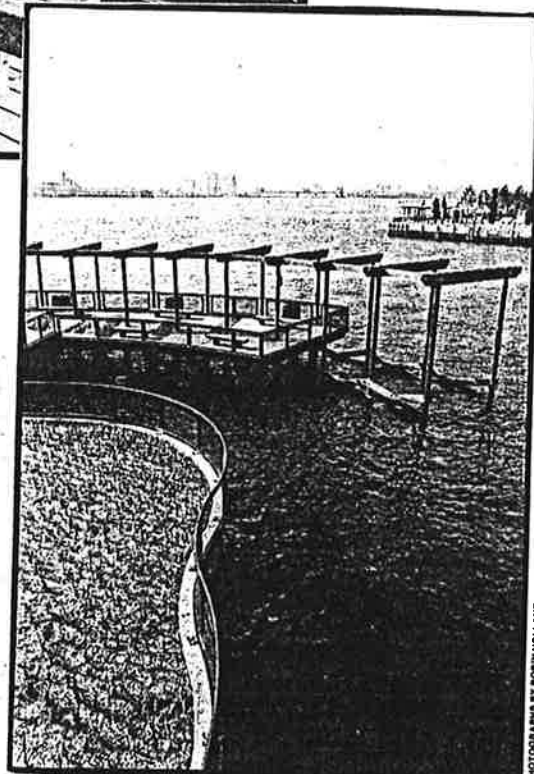
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ing and tables, shade and sunlight—is a primary issue. A way out of modernism's ever-more-strenuous reflexive exertions, this work is also a way back to modernist integrations of form and function, and a stimulus to once-languishing relations between architecture and sculpture.

South Cove, which brings together artist Mary Miss, architect Stanton Eckstut, and landscape architect Susan Child, is the next Battery Park City project to be completed. It opens formally July 12, and shows this species of public art at its best. Located on a three-acre site at the base of the riverfront Esplanade, *South Cove* brings the public more intimately in contact with the water than any other component of Battery Park City or, indeed, any other Manhattan riverside park.

Two walkways hug the cove, one paved boardwalk-style in wood, another in the hexagonal pavers used throughout the Esplanade. This and another meandering walkway terminate in a jetty that hooks into the cove, forming a nearly complete circle bisected by a gently arched bridge. The jetty is paved mostly in wood, though at one point it is extended by metal grating, so you can actually see the

Mary Miss, Stanton Eckstut, and Susan Child: *South Cove* (details, above and right, 1988)



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBIN HOLLAND

river beneath your feet. Lights along the water are nautical blue, and wooden detailing on the seawall is revealed in increments as the tides come and go. To one side of the bridge is a small, irregularly shaped island, to the other a congruent field of water, crossed by the concrete beams that extend laterally beneath the Esplanade, which here, as throughout its one-and-a-quarter-mile extent, hangs above the river.

The collaborators were particularly interested in this feature of the Esplanade and expressed it throughout their design. Wooden dockside lampposts (elsewhere they are traditional iron) are positioned atop these support lines, as are landscaped stands of honey locusts. Stepping

down into the water from the lampposts are wooden pilings at graduated heights. As with many elements of the project, these alignments are more felt than seen. At the point where the arched bridge meets the walkway is a lookout tower, shielded with curved-steel grating that echoes the island's contour and also, more distantly, the crown of the Statue of Liberty.

As careful in its responses to more abstract issues as it is to the physical conditions of the landfill, *South Cove* gently winds down the pedestrian's unavoidably taxing—if stimulating—tour of Battery Park City and lower Manhattan beyond. The Esplanade is not abandoned, but it is

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split and softened. Wide granite steps linking the project's two levels are broken up by rock outcroppings placed to suggest glacial deposits—an anomalously theatrical but still harmonious element. The plan overall is neither immoderately lyrical nor a rigid extension of the grid taken from adjacent streets into Battery Park City. Water and land, the built and the unbuilt, are brought without coercion or compromise—though not without considerable effort—to an understanding.

The same could be said of the process by which the \$7 million *South Cove* came into existence. As one of the principal designers of Battery Park City's critically well-received 1979 master plan, Stan Eckstut understandably had a somewhat protective attitude toward its salient features. Says Miss, "Stan had a strong notion of continuity with the Esplanade. I wanted to disrupt it, or at least do something very different." Landscape archi-

tect Susan Child, credited by both her partners with contributing substantially to the naturalistic image of the cove, agrees that Eckstut was more interested in the project's built environment. He sees it differently. "Our greatest advantage," he says, "was a lack of preconceived ideas." Not surprisingly, all three describe the working process as difficult, yet all feel—and it is the first true cross-disciplinary collaboration for each—that their sensibilities are basically compatible. "I'm interested in the experience of a place, rather than an image or idea of it," Miss says, "and Stan shares that street-level focus." And all would gladly enter into such an arrangement again. "I like working this way. It forces you to not take the path you'd usually take, and adds a layer of complexity to a situation. If left to my own devices, I never would have come up with exactly what's there, and yet there's nothing I would have rather done."

Already open at Battery Park City is Ned Smyth's *The Upper Room*, a colonnaded quasi-Mediterranean court surfaced in mosaic and concrete aggregate. R. M. Fischer's *Rector Gate*, scheduled for completion in the fall, is a soaring metal arch with seating and lighting at its base that derives its imagery from science fiction and commercial cookware, 19th century engineering and Shogun armor. Richard Artschwager's oversize furniture—two lounge chairs made of purple heart wood, one eight feet wide; two nine-foot-high granite side chairs; a wonderfully loony, Buck Rogersesque lighting fixture centering on a cutoff version of the traditional lamp used throughout the Esplanade—will also be completed this fall. Scott Burton, Siah Armajani, Cesar Pelli, and landscape architect Paul Friedberg have been working since 1982 on the commanding World Financial Center plaza, which sweeps around the Esplanade's North Cove.

Among its most promising features will be two lines of railing uprights, each supporting a single letter from quotes of Whitman and Frank O'Hara. Jennifer Bartlett has been working more recently with architect Alexander Cooper on a sprawling garden, high on color, pattern, and fancy architectural accessories, that will link the southern end of Battery Park City to Battery Park.

These projects share an outré sense of social responsibility. Think of this kind of public art (this helps visualize the artists' usual material payoff, too) as a civil service. It's not generally very radical; that is, it doesn't proceed by defiance. Nor is it obsequious, seditiously or otherwise; its ideas about popular taste, about visual experiences that have interest outside the art tribe, are different from Haim Steinbach's, or Jeff Koons's. *South Cove* and its ilk are instead, to risk a term that's long been in the political doghouse, culturally progressive. ■