



# landscape architecture

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS 11/2016 \$5.97/5AN\$9

New York's New Edges  
Nancy Owens at Fort Totten

MVVA by the Hudson  
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New Life for Mafia Blocks

# Civilian Control

*Nancy Owens Studio reshapes Fort Totten Park for a lasting peace.*

By Alex Ulam





**A**LTHOUGH FORT TOTTEN PARK is one of the lesser-known parks in New York City, it occupies one of the city's most spectacular sites. Here on a peninsula at the confluence of the East River and the Long Island Sound—at the outer edge of the city's borough of Queens—is a campus of sprawling parade grounds, abandoned gun batteries, brick barracks, and elegant Colonial Revival houses with large, white-columned porches. Most of the buildings and the surrounding grounds were designed to serve the needs of various military installations that occupied this site from the mid-1800s to the late 20th century. In addition to houses that look as if they could form the backdrop for *Gone With the Wind*, the site's natural hilly topography also offers spectacular views of the surrounding waterways.

Finding your way around this place, where there are fenced-off areas and people walking around in uniforms, is a real adventure. At the entrance, gateposts are crowned with real ship mines that during World War II were placed in Long Island Sound. Just beyond the gate, guards in a booth stop unauthorized cars. Security is a big issue here. The New York City Department of Parks & Recreation property, which is a municipally recognized historic district, occupies 49 acres of this 149-acre peninsula. And although many of the historic houses at the Fort Totten complex are empty, the rest of the land here is divided up into parcels occupied by the New York Fire Department, the U.S. Army Reserve, the U.S. Coast Guard, and a New York City Police Department facility where, it is rumored, the department conducts antiterrorism training.

MICHAEL WEISSA, TOP; COURTESY NANCY OWENS STUDIO, BOTTOM



As you continue along a winding asphalt roadway, past a baseball field and some hedges, you encounter a 200-foot-long large earthen mound that looks as if it were designed by a prehistoric Indian tribe. This is the edge of the newly completed North Park section of Fort Totten Park, designed by the landscape architecture and urban design firm Nancy Owens Studio. The park opened this past spring.

The new nine-acre park, built on a large grassy slope within the larger Fort Totten Park property (for which Owens has also designed a master plan), introduces several contemporary abstract landscape forms, all of them quite large, into a place dominated by historic scenery. From the top of the earthen mound, which Owens says was meant to have the qualities of a burial mound, visitors have a view down the hillside toward the Long Island Sound. Cutting across the

slope of the hill below is a series of small plateaus dominated by several curvilinear bands of tall switchgrass with *puffs* of mowed lawn in between them. On one side of the park is a one-acre bioswale, with trees, herbaceous plants, and shrubs that partially shield views of a parking lot for fire department vehicles and three sorry survivors of mass production Capehart housing that the military built here with concrete block and brick veneers in the late 1950s.

Designing a contemporary landscape on a historic site such as Fort Totten raises a host of thorny issues—most notably, how to successfully introduce a new aesthetic to a public place that lies far from the cosmopolitan city center. This challenge is all the more complicated considering the park's location in the sprawling suburban neighborhood of Bayside, a diverse place, yet one that is divided up into areas characterized by an extreme degree of stylistic

Fort Totten Park occupies one of the most spectacular natural settings in New York City, opposite top. The remaining Endicott Gun Battery at Fort Totten Park, opposite bottom, is one of the highlights of a visit to this historic site. Shoreline Shift is a series of ribbons of switchgrass that cut across North Park, top. The designers contoured the site so as to maximize views of the Long Island Sound, right.





The parks department's 49 acres, delineated in green, above, constitute only about a third of the entire Fort Totten site. Before Nancy Owens Studio's design was built, Capehart housing from the 1950s occupied the nine-acre North Park site outlined in red, below.



Various government entities occupy Fort Totten, above. Although there are no signs in the park to provide explanations for the various signature design elements, the key code on the plan below makes clear the intent behind them—particularly the ribbons of switchgrass, which follow several of the site's contour lines. The letters correspond to photos in this article, showing the corresponding views from those locations.

uniformity—Tudor-style subdivisions, private gated communities, and perfectly manicured lawns.

On a Saturday afternoon in August, most of the people who were visiting Fort Totten Park were not actually in North Park but were instead lounging in other areas—in front of the historic buildings or on the parade ground. The burial mound and the ribbons of tall switchgrass failed to impress one of the few visitors to North Park: John Arnold, a cyclist of middle age who stopped off with his three children to use the public bathroom trailer located midway down the hill. "It reminds me of a grass-made Vietnam memorial," Arnold said. He has been visiting Fort Totten since the days when it was a military base and he used to sneak onto the site with his friends. Although pavement and dreary Capehart housing once dominated this particular part



PHOTOGRAPHY: NANCY OWENS STUDIO; THE COURTESY CITY OF NEW YORK DEPARTMENT OF PARKS & RECREATION

COURTESY NANCY OWENS STUDIO





About half the park's design and construction budget went into tearing down the Capehart housing, top, after which the site was cleared, center, and planted, above.

Although North Park has been substantially transformed, right, care was taken to preserve the grading of drip lines around preexisting trees to avoid disturbing roots and to minimize erosion.



of the park, Arnold lamented that the bands of switchgrass interfered with views of the Long Island Sound below.

Despite what appears so far to be lackluster reception by visitors, this small section of New York City parkland, which cost \$3.8 million to design and build, has a couple of important distinctions. It is one of about 150 projects chosen to participate in an international pilot program for the Sustainable Sites Initiative (SITES), the new ecological rating system for landscape design that is a joint project of ASLA, the Lady Bird Johnson Wildlife Flower Center at the University of Texas at Austin, and the United States Botanic Garden. North Park's other major distinction is that Nancy Owens Studio designed it under the New York City Depart-

ment of Parks & Recreation's Design Excellence Program, an effort by the agency to hire cutting-edge talent from the private sector to augment its in-house landscape design team. Owens's firm is one of eight landscape architecture firms that have been chosen to participate for a two-year term in the program.

North Park earned a place in the SITES pilot program for restoring the historic ecology of the site with indigenous plantings. Formerly, this area had roads, parking lots, and 19 U.S. Army Capehart houses—the houses' demolition consumed half of the park's design and construction budget. Today, this area has completely transformed with the addition of more than 200 new trees and 10,000 grasses. The densely planted bioswale, which com-

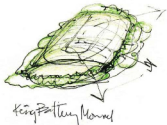
prises almost an entire acre of plants, catches stormwater runoff that formerly emptied out into the Long Island Sound.

The abstract landscape forms evoke the work of the Earth Art movement and Robert Smithson, and they have names to explain the design intent behind them. Shoreline Shift is the title of the ribbons of tall switchgrass that traverse the site. In addition to referencing Fort Totten's irregular shoreline, the switchback grasses are meant to follow the contour lines on a map—thus where the slope is steeper, the ribbon of grasses is narrower, and in places where the land is flatter, the grass ribbon is wider.

The "burial mound" is officially called the King Battery Mound, and it marks the location of the King Battery, where 30



One of the most striking features of North Park is the view of Long Island Sound, here, which is partially obscured by the ribbons of switchgrass. The 200-foot-long King Battery Mound, right, which is situated at the highest point at Fort Totten, is an inverted commemoration of a sunken gun battery that once occupied the site.



sunken mortar gun pits were built in 1871. The engineered slope and the large scale of the mound are meant to be evocative of Fort Totten's historic ramparts. However, visitors must either intuitively grasp the meaning of King Battery Mound and Shoreline Shift or learn about them through reading an article about the park, because there are no signs at the site that identify these landforms.

You certainly would never know that North Park was once the site of a compound of generic military housing crisscrossed with roadways that contributed to the pollution of the Long Island Sound. Nancy Owens Studio definitely has improved environmental conditions at North Park. However, the whole place functions more as a gigantic earth artwork than as a traditional public park. In some ways the situation is analogous to the case of Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall, which was initially reviled by many who later came to appreciate the black slabs' existence in the middle of an area dominated by classical forms. If North Park eventually succeeds in attracting visitors then it will have succeeded as a park. But it is too soon to tell.

*Alex Ulam is a freelance journalist who writes frequently on architecture and design for publications such as The Architect's Newspaper and The Real Deal.*

**PROJECT CREDITS** **Designer/landscape architect:** Nancy Owens Studio LLC, New York (Nancy Owens, ASLA, principal; Anne Berman, ASLA; Dechen Gonnot; Tim Rowe, ASLA; Elizabeth Knotts; Alexandros Zervas, Associate ASLA). **Client:** City of New York | Department of Parks & Recreation (Adrian Benepe, Honorary ASLA, commissioner; Charles McKinney, Affiliate ASLA, chief of design; David Carlson, ASLA, deputy chief of design; Rachel Kramer, project manager; John Godek, resident engineer; Michele White, landscape construction; Janice Nelnick, NE Queens administrator). **Civil engineering:** McLaren Engineering Group, West Nyack, New York. **Electrical engineering:** IP Group, New York. **Ecology:** Great Ecology & Environments Inc., New York. **Architecture:** Walter B. Melvin Architects PC, New York. **Archaeology:** Joan H. Geismar, New York. **Historic preservation:** Mary B. Diercks, New York. **Graphic design:** Laurel Marx Design, New York. **Cost estimation:** Faithful + Gould, New York. **Construction document review:** Site-Works LLC, New York. **General contractor:** Tucci Equipment Rental Corporation, Bronx, New York.