Hail to the Blue and the Green

Waterfront parks do double duty: They bolster the downtown and help meet sustainability goals.

By JoAnn Greco

What does a city do with rotting piers and dilapidated waterfront warehouses? Three decades ago, the answer was to bring in dollars with a festival marketplace. Think of Boston’s Faneuil Hall, Baltimore’s Inner Harbor, and a slew of smaller copycats. The cities loved them, but the critics didn’t. No real connection to the water and no green space, they said.

“A lot has happened since then,” says Amanda Burden, FAICP, director of New York City’s Department of City Planning, in alluding to developments like the South Street Seaport and Battery Park City. “We’ve brought people to the water’s edge, and we promoted a redeveloped waterfront. But now we see very clearly that there is a competition between natural and developed uses. We need to balance and prioritize them.”

New York is in the midst of a park renaissance. Over the past eight years, the city has reportedly spent more than $3 billion on parks, with much more planned. It’s all part of Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s 30-year PlaNYC comprehensive plan, which shoots for a goal of having no resident live more than 10 minutes from a park. And since, as Burden points out, four of the city’s five boroughs are on islands, much of this new park land fronts on the water.

All over the country, parks are today’s favorite option when it comes to cleaning up the docks. This year, about a third of the awards submissions to the Waterfront Center — an advocacy group based in Washington, D.C. — feature parks, as opposed to, say, casinos, hotels, or condos. “The newest waterfront developments devote substantial acreage to parks, greenways, and trails,” says Ann Breen, the center’s co-director. “They push for public access and emphasize the water for its own sake. Of course, economic stimulus can come out of this, but it’s no longer the primary focus.”

Meeting a need

“Just about every American downtown feels a desperate need for more parkland, and waterfronts offer newfound land in many downtowns,” says Paul Ostergaard, a principal at the Pittsburgh-based Urban Design Associates, which has worked on waterfront parks in Toronto and Cincinnati, among others. The most successful waterfront parks, he adds, are the ones that are connected to the city and to public transit.

Such parks can extend the street grid and ensure that a city’s downtown edge doesn’t just peter out into the usual waterfront assemblage of parking structures, ramshackle warehouses, and tangled highways.

“We come across this again and again in the planning process,” says Gina Ford, principal and landscape architect with Boston-based Sasaki Associates. “In Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where we’ve just completed a master plan for a riverfront park, the downtown comes right to the Cedar River. But there’s no sense of continuity. There’s a huge psychic division between the downtown and the river.”

Sasaki’s master plan proposes to close this gap by adding a combination of grand gathering places and more intimate spaces. It features both an arboretum and an amphitheater. “Every community wants to have new programming,” Ford says, “but the biggest issue is to have that connectivity and access; that’s what will make sure the park gets used.”

Ford notes that the new master plan ties into the city’s sustainability goals, such as protecting the flood plain. Conceived as part of a series of planning initiatives following the 2008 flood that devastated the downtown, the new park is intended to give the river “breathing room,” she says. It is also aimed at reducing flood danger by using permeable paving and restoring the river banks by removing old industrial structures.
In Portland, Oregon, complying with federal requirements for salmon protection meant it took longer than expected to complete a 2.5-acre park in the mixed use south waterfront development along the Willamette River. "This is a district where if you try to do a transfer of FAR or get a height bonus, it usually links back to more open space," says Portland senior planner Troy Doss. "So it's ironic that we were challenged when we were trying to go ahead with this waterfront park." The park, named after Elizabeth Caruthers, an Oregon pioneer, opened this August.

**Image counts**

Whether a waterfront park enhances a city's economic development or bolsters its sustainability goals, or both, its presence can boost a city's image. "Parks on the water make New York more competitive with other cities because of the access, recreation, and beauty they offer," says Burden. "They become another crucial way to enjoy the vibrancy and density of our city. Parks also add a sense of safety and activity along the water's edge."

In Columbus, Ohio, a mile-long park is set to open next summer along the Scioto River, which runs through the city's downtown. "Our goal is to make Scioto Park a regional attraction," says Amy Taylor of the Columbus Downtown Development Corporation. "Our downtown residential population is now 5,600 — nearly double what it was five years ago — and this park is the cornerstone of our plans to make the riverfront a neighborhood."

As part of the park development, the city has already narrowed a five-lane highway into a more pedestrian-friendly two-lane, two-way thoroughfare. It has also installed porch swings, benches, and picnic tables along the resulting promenade as well as a bioswale of native grasses and willow trees. When the completed park opens, it will feature a band shell, a cafe, and four fountains.

Cities built on rivers have always recognized the appeal of their waterfront settings, designers point out. Like other city plans, Thomas Mawson's 1912 General Plan for Calgary presented a grand vision of a waterfront park, says Cathy Sears, vice president for the North American engineering, planning, and design firm Stantec. "Almost 100 years later, the new RiverWalk focuses on the energy of the Bow and Elbow rivers to renew the connection between place, people, and the waterfront," she says.

Cincinnati has been working on that connection for about 50 years, according to Vice Mayor Roxanne Qualls. "The reality is that you can't do this stuff in five years," she says. "Every generation has taken one major step forward."

Here is a closer look at how Cincinnati and three other downtowns are realizing their plans for waterfront parks.

**Undoing the damage**

Waterfront developments may have baggage. "Nearly all the waterfront developments we've worked on have had to overcome a barrier," says Ostergaard of Urban Design Associates, "whether it's rail tracks, a floodplain, or changes in topography." For Cincinnati's Riverfront Park, for which UDA created the overall redesign, Hargraves Associates the master plan, and Sasaki the park design, the problem was an expressway.

In 1996, Hamilton County voters finally approved a sales tax to support the construction of two new stadiums along the Ohio River, leading to a plan to expand the park system. Once the stadiums were under way, says Qualls, the city began creating a new mixed use neighborhood, The Banks, in an area dominated by warehouses and railroad tracks. A 45-acre park was a centerpiece of the project.

As part of the stadium projects, a 30-year-old riverfront freeway, Fort Washington Way, was reconfigured to eliminate some on and off ramps, and service roads became wide streets with plantings. The reworked highway also made room for a bus transit center, adding a critical public park access. Several streets are situated so they can be used as alignments for light rail in the future, as the master plan specifies, says Ostergaard. Total investment to date stands at about $1 billion, including the stadiums' construction costs.

The park, which centers on an 1866 John Roebling-designed iron suspension bridge, will showcase remnants of early 19th century buildings uncovered during construction. There will be event spaces, docks, and a promenade at the river's edge. Also planned: gardens and bike trails, cafes and restaurants, a carousel, and an adventure playground. Parts of phase one — including the event lawn — are on schedule to be unveiled next spring.

The park's green bona fides include its sweeping lawns, which act as stormwater retainers, and the riverside promenade, which will serve to armor the city against flooding. The Metropolitan Sewer District of Greater Cincinnati, like many other jurisdictions, is under federal court order to reduce the amount of stormwater reaching its sewers, says Ostergaard. "Instead of spending huge sums to bury pipes underground to store stormwater, it's more attractive to think of creating linear greenways," he says.
A green bracelet

A few years ago, Nashville’s park department teamed up with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to develop the long-range Nashville Riverfront Concept Plan. The plan, released in 2007, notes that “Nashville has the potential to create a great waterfront that is truly world-class.” The planners’ ultimate goal was to develop an underused waterfront area of about five miles and 5,000 acres. But to start, they identified a three-quarter-mile corridor on both sides of the Cumberland River, where much of the land is city owned. Nashville’s central business district is on the west side of the river, as is a 1980s riverside park; across the way is a municipal football stadium that was built in 1999.

“It seemed smartest and easiest to start with property we already own,” points out Ed Owens, AICP, waterfront redevelopment director for the Metropolitan Development and Housing Authority. “The intention is to focus on a series of parks and open space amenities on both sides, and to set a springboard for alternative economic development initiatives, whether public or private.”

All told, the master plan entails 19 park projects, budgeted at about $50 million. “They are to be undertaken as the money comes along,” says Owens, “kind of like the way you put together a charm bracelet. It was envisioned that this could all be accomplished in about five years. Now, of course, things have changed.”

A hard-hit economy — and a major flood last March — may have slowed things down, but Owens says “we’re getting started.” In spring 2009, Mayor Karl F. Dean recommended allocating $30 million of the city’s capital improvement budget toward the project. The first charm, a $9 million adventure playground to encompass 6.5 acres on the river’s east side, is about ready to begin construction. Other projects, because they come closer to touching the water, are “caught up in higher level permits that need to be presented to the Army Corps,” says Owens.

A bend in the river

The 22-mile Trinity River Corridor Project is the largest, most complex urban development effort ever undertaken in Dallas. It’s an ambitious attempt to make better use of an amenity on the western fringe of downtown whose potential has been recognized since new plans for the city were developed after the great flood of 1908.

“During the whole century, the river’s ability to contribute to our quality of life never manifested itself,” says David Whitley of the Dallas CityDesign Studio, a public-private effort to focus on the city’s design needs. Instead, he says, the river became a barrier between the northern and southern parts of the city, with most recent development occurring in the north.

This enormous waterfront project includes a bridge designed by Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava, and the restoration of a bend in the river, which was straightened by the Corps as a flood-control measure. The price tag exceeds $2 billion. A 1998 bond authorized $246 million in city funds, and federal, state, and private sources are slated to provide the rest.

The Trinity River corridor’s “balanced vision plan” emphasizes that the redeveloped land is expected to have both recreational and environmental benefits. It will protect wetlands while enhancing recreation in a manmade chain of lakes. The park elements encompasses about 10,000 acres — a quarter of the entire corridor — with public amenities, environmental protection, floodwater safeguards, and transportation elements, Whitley notes. The rest of the corridor will be given over to private, mixed use development.

All of this is pegged to occur by 2015, with one segment already completed. The Trinity Audubon Center, constructed on an illegal dump about eight miles outside of downtown Dallas, is a LEED-certified building that serves as an interpretative center run by the city in partnership with the National Audubon Society.

Making WAVES

New York City has some 500 miles of shoreline — the nation’s longest and most diverse. Still, it’s no secret that, as Amanda Burden points out, “this is a city that has turned its back on the water for a long time.”

It wasn’t until the big commercial shipping companies began to leave the city that New York took a serious new look at its waterfront. “Now, we’ve completely embraced the water,” says Burden. Last April, the city officially launched its Waterfront Vision and Enhancement Strategy (WAVES), an interagency initiative that establishes long-term goals for increasing public access to the waterfront. In September, Burden’s department introduced its recommendations, Vision 2020: Comprehensive Waterfront Plan.

The plan calls for balance in five areas: protection of natural settings, respect for the working waterfront, public access, open space, and economic development. Parks play a critical role in each area because, Burden says, “they are the key link from the upland to the water.” And, she adds, parks help to meet the sustainability goals of the city’s comprehensive plan, PlaNYC: Design
Burden also points out that public access is now mandated for private waterfront developments, even in areas that house the city’s most valuable and tightly packed real estate, and parks are the perfect vehicle to provide that access.

In Manhattan, the most notable project is the great swath of parkland along the Hudson River, continuing what the Battery Park promenade started 20 years ago. Burden is equally excited, though, about a new park project on the eastern side of the island. The East River waterfront esplanade is intended to create a continuous greenway from Battery Park City eastward to the South Street Seaport, where the waterfront movement began, and beyond.

Snaking two miles along the East River, the park will move north through the Financial District, Chinatown, and the Lower East Side. Nearly $150 million in federal and state funding will pay for recreational pavilions, picnic areas, and pier access. "It will be as exciting as the High Line," Burden promises. "They’re building a new two-level pier that will have a bar at the water’s edge, with chaise lounges on a green. The underside of the FDR Drive will be painted purple. It’s going to be fantastic."

With uses such as boat docks, a maritime education component, lawns, and habitat restoration along the way, the project promises to do everything that festival marketplaces do — feed and entertain — while incorporating the newer elements of today’s riverfront parks.

Planners say that balance of the old fun and sun with the new sustainability and true water access is what makes all the difference.

JoAnn Greco is a Philadelphia-based writer who frequently writes about planning issues.

**Resources**

**Images:** Top — When completed, New York City’s Lower Manhattan Esplanade will snake along the East River, creating a two-mile-long waterfront greenway. Photo rendering courtesy New York City Economic Development Corporation. Bottom — A bird’s eye perspective of the site map for Cincinnati’s riverfront. The area’s master plan includes a mixed use neighborhood with a 45-acre park as its centerpiece. Image ©Urban Design Associates.

**Readings:** See these previous Planning stories about parks: "Parks: How Far Is Too Far?" (December 2004), "Proceed Without Caution" (July 2008), and "Parks Under Siege" (October 2008).

APA’s April 2011 National Planning Conference will include about half a dozen mobile workshops to various parks, including the famous Emerald Necklace park system near Boston.

**On the web:** Cincinnati’s Riverfront Park: [www.mycincinnatiriverfrontpark.com](http://www.mycincinnatiriverfrontpark.com)
Nashville’s Riverfront Concept Plan: [www.nashvilleriverfront.org](http://www.nashvilleriverfront.org)
In Dallas, the Trinity River Corridor Project: [www.trinityrivercorridor](http://www.trinityrivercorridor)

**Books:** Peter Harnik’s book, *Urban Green: Innovative Parks for Resurgent Cities*, was published earlier this year ($30 from www.APAPlanningbooks.com). It is reviewed in the August/September 2010 issue of Planning.
And the first sounded his trumpet, and there was hail and fire having been mixed with blood, and it was cast upon the earth. And a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up. And hail and fire followed, mingled with blood, and they were thrown to the earth. Team blue get in. Red and green are trying to organize against us.

The Azure Empire and the Sapphire Republic, linked together in their cause and in their need, will defend to the death their native soil, aiding each other like good comrades to the utmost of their strength. Even though large tracts of /r/place and many old and famous buttons have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Red Guard and all the odious apparatus of Crimson rule, we shall not flag or fail. "Hail to the Buff and Blue" is the official fight song of the George Washington University Colonials athletic teams. The song is played daily at 12:15 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. by the bells located atop Corcoran Hall on the University Yard. The song was composed in 1924 by then-student Eugene F. Sweeney for a contest to choose a new fight song. The University had recently changed its colors from orange and blue to buff and blue, and the original fight song, Orange and Blue, had become obsolete. Patrick M...