

**Report on the Wagner Park Resiliency Design Proposal**

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## The Background

Opened in 1996, Wagner Park was very much a product of thinking at the time about what should be done with the Manhattan waterfront. With the once-busy docking and shipping activity (which had long kept the public at bay) abandoning the shoreline for New Jersey, the opportunity arose to repurpose the edge for a greenbelt of parks. What could be more salubrious or unobjectionable? Cooper-Eckstut, the initial urban designers of the massive landfill project that came to be known as Battery Park City, must also have realized that this amenity would add to the desirability and allure of the new commercial and residential buildings that had to attract occupants. And indeed, though Battery Park City continues to be an incompletely assimilated transplant in the city grid, a successful real estate enclave that disconcertingly blends charm, order, exclusivity and sterility, the necklace of parks along its Hudson River rim has come to be its most aesthetically attractive, civic and democratic feature.

Depending on whether one is walking northward or southward along the Esplanade, Wagner Park is either the entry to or the culmination of the Battery Park City suite of parks overlooking the river. To traverse this stretch is to experience a remarkable contraction and expansion of recreational spaces, with forest-like copses, a capacious plaza replete with marina, and the magical South Cove drawing you into a tight nook of water-lapping repose. Wagner Park, with its broad lawns, is one of the larger exhalations in this systole-diastole pattern: it is capable of holding large crowds for outdoor performances.

An extra, poignant appeal is its name, which justly honors Bobby Wagner Jr., son of longtime Mayor Robert Wagner, and himself a Deputy Mayor, defender of landmark preservation and all-around civic-minded good guy who died too young. If Wagner Park is not quite the gem South Cove is, if it still carries itself with the slightly theoretical air of an architectural drawing that has not quite made it into bursting reality, it nevertheless has functioned well over the years for the purposes it was intended.

But much has changed since 1996, and the biggest change is our sharpened awareness of global warming, which threatens to bring frequent major storms, a rise in sea level and the very real danger of our coastal cities flooding. Hurricane Sandy taught us that New York, for all its sense of exceptionalness, was not immune to an inundation of streets and subways from which it is still trying to recover. No longer is it sufficient to foster a greener environment by making waterfront parks. It is incumbent on the Battery Park City Authority (BPCA) to come up with resiliency plans that will guard against flooding: by building walls or installing retractable barriers, by elevating existing structures, by creating wetlands and providing cisterns or catchments for excess runoff, and so on. A second change since 1996 is the advance in non-fossil fuel technologies and green architecture that offers an opportunity for the BPCA to decrease its carbon footprint. For all these reasons, the time has come to take another look at Wagner Park with an eye toward preserving its future and finding ways to renovate and improve it.

## The Building

The Wagner Park building is comprised of two connected pavilions, one of which currently houses an Italian cafe, Gigino, and the other, bathrooms and a storage space for the park. The architects, Machado Silvetti, a reputable Boston architectural firm, have won several awards in urban design, including for this one. That said, I do not think it is great shakes as architecture, for reasons I will presently explain, and I agree that in the long run it might be better to demolish it and erect a more suitable structure, as the BPCA's consulting architectural firm, Perkins Eastman, currently proposes.

Somberly clad in brown brick, with the taller northern pavilion peaked by a rounded arch like a protractor, it seems to be gesturing toward something vaguely whimsical or cartoonish with its looping curve, while held back by tasteful restraint. Perhaps this is what is meant when its champions call it "postmodernist." I don't find it so, but rather, late-modernist minus the rigor. According to its architects' statement, they see it as "a large, over-scaled masonry wall split in the center....The wall appears as a remnant of an exposed foundation of a colossal structure, its 'crumbling' towards the city alluding to a ruinous condition." Accustomed as I am to hearing architects describe their efforts in metaphors which no one other than themselves would ever guess, I must say I did not grasp this ruined wall motif. I did however detect the suggestion of a Roman aqueduct, or the Castel Sant'Angelo prison, but that's just me: in any case, it seemed that something both dignified and playful was being alluded to, though indistinctly, within the park structure's foreshortened confines.

To the rear of the building are two sets of granite staircases, taking up an inordinate amount of space in the overall footprint. These staircases have a pompous monumentality out of keeping with the rather modest building they surround. The idea seems to be that one can choose to ascend either one of them to arrive at a balcony on either pavilion, from which one can gaze to one's heart's content at the Statue of Liberty. A noble intent, but on several occasions I saw no one availing themselves of this lookout. In general they would appear to be rarely used, except for a once-a-year event like the Swedish Festival.

The other element of which the architects seem most proud is a rectangular doorway or passageway between the two pavilions, "framing the view to the Statue." It has been sited at a point where two view corridors converge. Oddly enough, I saw no one standing back in this doorway or gap between the two buildings, overtopped by a wooden bridge, and snapping pictures of Lady Liberty. The masses of tourists and locals went right up to the Esplanade, an attractive curved iron railing which is itself a magnet, in order to look out at exquisite New York Harbor and get closer to the water. The remaining visitors had seated themselves on the lawn or on a ledge in front of the building for a view of the Statue. It would seem, in short, that the architects of the original building put a good deal of thought into providing views that would precisely "frame" the Statue of Liberty, as though it were the Taj Mahal, but they over-estimated the call for this ocular configuration. Most visitors are happy enough seeing it bob on the water from any old angle, with vast spaces of sky surrounding it.

The café space looks as if it were initially designed as a park concession stand, not a restaurant: it is quite small, with extremely restricted seating (eight tables), and a tiny kitchen and larder. On a mild, pleasant day, the lack of seating can be finessed by outdoor tables under a plastic tent, but clearly this is not the case in cold, inclement weather. There is something endearing about Gigino, perhaps because it manages to function as well as it does despite its limited size, about 1,800 square feet; but the owner, Phil Suarez, readily admits that its kitchen is “stunningly small,” and he looks forward to the erection of a new building with more space, which could give a restaurant two floors instead of one.

The building at it is presently constituted sits low and would need to be hoisted up to meet resiliency standards. The proposed Perkins Eastman building would come much closer to the desired elevation, by constructing it atop a terrace, with a cistern area underneath the building that would catch excess rainwater. Such a terrace would also accommodate much more unobstructed views of the Statue of Liberty than the present narrow passageway, and there would also be a roof deck for those who crave an overlook vantage point. Preliminary drawings show extensive glass windows for the new restaurant, whose indoor tables would face the harbor and provide yet more opportunities to view the Statue.

There is nothing drastically bad about the current building, and it would be nice to contemplate leaving it as is, since it has been a good soldier and served the public well enough. However, its thin brick façade is subject to frequent deterioration from winter storms and salt water, which seep into the cracks. The building at present needs major repairs. Estimates run as high as ten million dollars for retrofitting it and making it more energy-efficient, as well as more suitable for a restaurant. The BPCA's needs for storage have also grown: the current storage space is only eight feet high, making for a low ceiling for shelving and machinery. The logical thing would be to tear down the building and start anew.

What then is the problem?

### The Controversy

The opposition to the Wagner Park redesign proposal stems in part from an entirely understandable defensive posture regarding any intervention in the city's public parks. There is legitimate fear of innovation that threatens to commercialize public space or take away land. The proposed new building, however, would occupy the same footprint as the current one, so there is no danger of reducing the available acreage. It could as much as double the square footage of the current building. An argument could be made, I suppose, that the very unimpressive nature of the current building makes it blend more easily into the landscape, whereas a larger structure would be ostentatious. That is a lame rationale for keeping things as they are, especially since the present structure is in deteriorated shape, would be extremely costly to repair, and is ill-suited for its ostensible function as a restaurant.

A new building could also be more energy-efficient, with solar paneling, and provide more adequate storage area. I would hope a new building would strive for something architecturally more distinguished or exciting, taking advantage of the opportunity to up the ante.

Some opposition is based on the supposition that the BPCA is using the resiliency mandate to increase its rental revenues: in short, is acting out of greed. First of all, I don't see anything wrong with turning the restaurant into a more profitable operation—nor does the present café owner. We may all hanker for the old days when public space did not require revenue streams to pay for its upkeep, but those days are long gone (if indeed they ever existed in purer state). Underneath the opposition's emotional outcry, one senses, is a suspicion of the BPCA itself as a powerful Big Brother trying to have its way with the community. Again, such suspicions are not necessarily paranoid, given the history of New York real estate, public authorities and local politics. Still, it behooves us to look at the actual details of the proposal, which augur many improvements that would actually enhance this public space.

The proposed footbridge connecting Pier A to Wagner Park is a no-brainer: it would alleviate the awkwardness of having to walk out of one's way to get from one facility to the other. Now that Pier A, which had lain fallow for decades, has been retrofitted into a lively bar and restaurant, it beckons as a neighbor. One might think that Pier A would be nervous about having another, expanded restaurant alongside it, but perhaps their support for the proposal speaks to the realization that this area of lower Manhattan is under-served for food and beverages, and two eateries would act as a more compelling draw, resulting in better business for all concerned.

The proposed wetland facing Pier A would not only improve drainage but would enable visitors to go right up to the water, something rare in Manhattan's shoreline which is generally girded round by prophylactic fences and highways.

Removing the concrete segmentation of the boxed-in lawns, which makes the present set-up choppily corral-like, and turning them into one big, unimpeded lawn, also seems to me a good idea: it would improve drainage and add some extra footage for grass. Similarly, taking away the granite benches that are at the bottom of the incline, which are unnecessarily bulky, and replacing them with lawn, makes for better flood control. I realize these benches are supposed to provide additional ideal sightings for the Statue of Liberty and to offer seating for public performances, but the former is redundant, and the latter assumes that performers should be placed at the bottom against the river's backdrop, exhibiting maximum glare at sunset, when it might be wiser to have them perform on either the north or south side of the park or in front of the building. Removing those granite benches and the corralling concrete would also make it possible to introduce the footpath which the proposal calls for, which would improve circulation diagonally from one end of the park to the other.

The proposed summer stage alongside the Museum of Jewish Heritage is a wonderful way to integrate that somewhat fortress-like institution more organically into the spirit of the park. I can envision various talks, concerts or other events that would be geared to specific exhibits. No wonder the director of the museum is so in favor of the BPCA proposal.

Finally, in addressing the opposition to the BPCA proposal, one must acknowledge the contemporary resistance to any development that would alter the city's fabric. It is far easier today to shoot down a proposal for change than to get something built. Battery Park City itself would probably never have been greenlighted in today's climate. Though Wagner Park is only twenty years old, that span seems to have generated sufficient nostalgia for the wish in some circles that nothing about it be altered. In a statement from the opposition headlined "Architects aren't happy with plans to remodel this Manhattan park," we are told that "The Battery Park City Authority (BPCA) is set to replace the existing landscape that *architects and residents love* [my italics] with a park that it says will align better with new resiliency measures that are reshaping the Manhattan waterfront." This vague assertion of universal love by architects and residents for the park as it was laid out in every original detail is debatable. I can well imagine the chagrin of the first designers, Olin Partnership, Lynden Miller and Machado Silvetti, at the prospect of having their work altered or dismantled. Maybe some opposition to the BPCA's proposal is coming from professional friends, who are rushing to the defense of their colleagues. But we are not talking here about a situation like MOMA's cannibalizing the Museum of Folk Art, or the Museum of Art and Design at Columbus Circle renovating the façade of the old Huntington Hartford Museum. By no stretch of the imagination is the Machado Silvetti building that architecturally significant. As for the public at large, I doubt they would even register, much less grieve over, the changes that the BPCA's proposal would bring. Wagner Park would still be Wagner Park, and it would and will still be—lovable.