

Wiesława Gadomska (wiga@uwm.edu.pl)

Department of Landscape Architecture, University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn

## GOVERNORS ISLAND: A NEW PARK IN NEW YORK

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## GOVERNORS ISLAND: NOWY PARK NOWEGO JORKU

### Abstract

The paper presents the process of transformation of a specific part of New York, i.e. Governors Island, located south of Manhattan, into yet another large municipal park. The specific natural and cultural conditions of the area, which is separate from the intense city network, have influenced the manner of developing the new park space. The basic design issues included: reference to the clear historical context resulting from the heritage of the defence fort, which functioned here for centuries, taking into account difficult eco-physiographic conditions resulting from the island's location in an area exposed to dangerous weather anomalies; and the use of the significant landscape potential of the island, offering excellent conditions for the visual perception of the characteristic city skyline and its surroundings. The project, implemented in stages, forms an example of the broader, interesting issue of urban space *recycling* [1] and the incorporation of new functions into an outdated spatial context.

**Keywords:** island park, urban space recycling, landscape context

### Streszczenie

Artykuł prezentuje proces transformacji specyficznego fragmentu Nowego Jorku – położonej na południe od Manhattanu wyspy Governors Island – w kolejny, duży park miejski. Specyficzne uwarunkowania naturalne i kulturowe odizolowanego od intensywnej tkanki miejskiej terenu bezpośrednio wpłynęły na sposób kształtowania nowej przestrzeni parkowej. Podstawowymi zagadnieniami projektowymi były: odniesienie się do czytelnego kontekstu historycznego wynikającego z dziedzictwa funkcjonującego przez wieki fortu obronnego, uwzględnienie trudnych warunków ekofizjograficznych wynikających z położenia wyspy w obszarze narażonym na groźne anomalie pogodowe oraz wykorzystanie dużego potencjału krajobrazowego wyspy, stwarzającego warunki doskonałej percepcji widokowej charakterystycznej sylwetki miasta i jego otoczenia. Realizowany etapami projekt stanowi przykład szerszej, interesującej problematyki swobodnego recyklingu przestrzeni miejskiej [1] i wpisywania nowych funkcji w zdezaktualizowany kontekst przestrzenny.

**Słowa kluczowe:** park na wyspie, recykling przestrzeni miejskiej, kontekst krajobrazowy

## 1. Introduction

A radical change in the status of Governors Island from an enclosed military zone into an open public space has had its precedence in the history of the city. One of them was the transformation of Ellis Island<sup>1</sup>, an island that initially performed a military function and later an administrative one, related to the immigration procedures in the USA. Ellis Island was transformed into an attractive public space managed by the Museum of Immigration, together with a unique garden of remembrance [3]. In the case of Governors Island, the attractive historical and recreational complex, constructed in stages and made available to the public successively, constitutes another step towards developing municipal green areas in the special conditions of the “Culture of Congestion” [4] of the New York metropolis. The rapidly growing popularity of the park, which is being built in stages, is confirmed by the increasing numbers of visitors<sup>2</sup>, and validates the justifiability of the strategy of providing the city with special “green infrastructure” [6] and offering it a growing role in the functioning of the modern metropolis<sup>3</sup>. The characteristics of park visits are also symptomatic: the area is used mainly by New Yorkers<sup>4</sup> during weekends – the new venue has not just become a new seasonal tourist attraction; it is mainly used by city inhabitants.

When observing the process of establishing yet another large municipal park, it is worth appreciating the scale of the phenomenon of setting up new green areas in New York, in particular in the context of the relatively high “green” index in the city [9]. In parallel to the establishment of the park on Governors Island (the surface area of the park is approx. 35 hectares), the construction of *Brooklyn Bridge Park* (surface area of the park: 34 hectares) is also being completed; what is more, in the last decade, the following parks were established and implemented in stages in the city: *Hudson River Park* in Manhattan (surface area of the park: 220 hectares, approx. 9 km of developed coastline) [10] and *Hunter Point Park* in Queens. The new park investments, significant in the scale of the city and conducted on a spectacular scale with respect to design and implementation, should be treated as a phenomenon characteristic for the city, and worthy of academic interest<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The island lies at a distance of just 2 km from Manhattan, and its surface area is 11 hectares; it is managed by the National Park Service; apart from its rich history, its ownership structure is also complex – a significant part of it belongs to the State of New Jersey [2].

<sup>2</sup> After the military function had expired, the island was opened to the public in 2005; at that time it was visited by approx. 8,000 people. Opening the park to the public in May 2014 caused an influx of 450,000 visitors in 2015 [5].

<sup>3</sup> The complex issue of establishing new green areas in the metropolis in the multi-directional approach of sustainable development is presented in the article [7].

<sup>4</sup> It is estimated that 85% of visitors to the island are inhabitants of New York [8].

<sup>5</sup> Since 2003, the author has been observing the changes and development of park areas in New York.

## 2. Governors island: an island within the city

Governors Island is located at a distance of just one kilometre from the southern bank of Manhattan, and, together with many other islands of the extensive archipelago, makes up the administrative area of New York<sup>6</sup>. The current surface area of the island is almost 70 hectares, which, in comparison to nearby Manhattan, constitutes only 1% of its surface; in reference to the entire surface area within the borders of New York, it is just a thousandth part. As part of the administrative division into five major city boroughs<sup>7</sup>, Governors Island belongs to Manhattan. In spite of its small size, the island had strategic significance in the city's development, resulting from its special location in the topographic configuration.

## 3. Natural conditions

The coastline of the island is surrounded by the waters of New York Bay – an extensive natural harbour, in the east designated by the coastline of New York, and in the west by the bank of New Jersey<sup>8</sup>. The northern coast of the island is washed by the East River and the Hudson River, and in the south the waters of New York Bay mix with Lower Bay and the waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

Today's shape of the island and its size are the result of engineering interference in the landscape, which took place in 1912. The original, natural island<sup>9</sup>, with a surface area of just 30 hectares, was extended by compressing almost 4 million m<sup>3</sup> of soil, derived from the first line of the New York underground, which was under construction. The significant scale of the interference resulted in the extension of Governors Island by over 40 hectares, supplementing its area in the south-west<sup>10</sup>. The artificially shaped, flat area of the island was surrounded by a low, regular coastline.

The location of Governors Island in a special point of convergence of two river valleys and the ocean's waters exposes the area of the island to the impact of strong (including hurricane) winds, which, in synergy with low and flat hypsometric characteristics, causes a high risk of damage and periodic flooding of its area by the waters of the bay<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> The area of New York, apart from solid land, is made up of islands: Manhattan, Staten Island, the western part of Long Island, and several other smaller islands [11].

<sup>7</sup> The City of New York is divided into five main boroughs; apart from Manhattan, these are: Brooklyn, Queens, Bronx and Staten Island [12].

<sup>8</sup> Harbours in Newark, Elizabeth, Jersey City and Hoboken form a part of New York Harbour [13].

<sup>9</sup> On the basis of a map from 1776 [14].

<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that the applied method of creating new land surface was used a number of times in subsequent years, *inter alia*, when support for large park projects was built – e.g. Battery Park City [15].

<sup>11</sup> New York is located within an area at risk of hurricane winds and the repercussions related to it, consisting, *inter alia*, in the flooding of low coastal areas; cataclysms recorded since the 17<sup>th</sup> century have hit the coasts of New York over 80 times; the last one, Hurricane Sandy in 2012, caused catastrophic destruction, flooding the area of lower Manhattan; the threat is recurring and intensifying [16].

#### 4. Cultural determinants, history

Throughout the centuries, in the pre-colonial period, the island could have been used as a place for finding food and resources guaranteeing a material base for the existence of the local native people. The original name in the local language (*Paggank*) denoted the place as the “island of nuts”, whereas its coastal water provided an abundance of fish and crustaceans. The place, together with the entire archipelago of islands surrounding it, was discovered by Hudson’s expedition in September 1609. European settlers started settling on the island in 1624. The Dutch West India Company made the first investment: a lumber mill providing timber for further extension of the settlement was built. Today’s name of the island, deriving from the period of British colonisation, indicated its privileged status as the place of residence of the important person of royal governor. Later use of the island, which dominated its character for almost 200 years, was determined by its location, ideal for developing military functions and defence infrastructure. The island became a strategically located element of the New York Bay defence system. In 1800, New York State assigned the island to the federal government. In subsequent years, important military facilities were located within its borders, along with the base of American military administration structures. During WWI, the island functioned as logistic back-up facilities related to the formation of troops sent to Europe. During WWII, it was an administrative centre and a recruitment facility. In 1966, military use of the island expired, along with the decision of the U.S. Department of Defense on the reduction of military installations. However, the special location of the place continued to be used – this time as the base of the United States Coast Guard. After 30 years of operation, in 1996, the base was closed down. The almost 200-year period of military and similar use of the island has exerted a clear impact on the character and the form of its management, and has created specific cultural heritage considered valuable and worthy of protection. In 1985, over 50% of the island’s surface area was included under the status of a National Historic Landmark. The area of protection encompassed the northern section of Governors Island, with fortifications, administrative buildings, barracks and residential facilities. Its unique facilities included: the extensive and impressive Fort Jay, with its bastion structure, and Castle Williams, a circular artillery fortification located on the north-western cape of the island. Furthermore, an extensive complex of administrative buildings with a courtyard-type layout and supplementary development, encompassing residential buildings, a public school and places of religious worship also contribute to the characteristic arrangement of the area. Intense management of the island was also continued in the post-military period, when the place was used as the coast guard location. The new function stimulated the enclosed space; approx. 3,500 people lived on the island permanently, and over 1,500 arrived there on an everyday basis to work. The investments performed in this period were located in the southern section of the island, and encompassed complexes of residential development along with infrastructure necessary for autonomous functioning. The decision on the expiry of the hitherto function of the island was made in 1995, and was dictated by a change in the

direction of operation of the Department of State Defense and the general necessity of reducing the costs of numerous federal agencies. The distribution of the administrative division, back-up facilities and equipment was completed in August 1996<sup>12</sup>.

## 5. Modern times

A large attractive area located close to Manhattan posed an open question about the future use of the island. The initial plan assumed the possibility of establishing a public park, but at the same time, it allowed for a significant share of commercial investments. In 1996, the Van Alen Institute announced an open idea competition under the name “Public Property” [17], the objective of which was to examine the island’s potential in its broad urban, cultural and eco-physiographic context. Proposals submitted by over 200 participants from 14 countries showed the great receptivity of the place and flexibility in shaping its future functions. The most important advantage of the competition was the initiation of a broad social discussion focused on open public access to the island and providing it with the character of an active place with respect to recreation, culture, art and innovation. At the same time, the ownership status of the island was undergoing significant changes: in 2001, its northern part, with a surface area of almost 9 hectares encompassing the two most important historical facilities (Fort Jay and Castle Williams), received the status of the Governors Island National Monument, and was transferred under the federal administration of the National Park Service. The remaining area was given to the State of New York, under the conditions of using the island for public benefit, and a ban on locating any permanent residential functions within its area.

The basic form of managing the island’s surface was determined via a closed design competition announced in 2006 by the Trust for Governors Island. Five teams<sup>13</sup> of recognized international renown were invited to present their concepts, which were shown to the public in the middle of 2007. In December 2007, the winner of the competition was announced: international design company West 8 Urban Design & Landscape Architecture, which has operated since 1987<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> On the basis of chronology resulting from the exhibition presented on the Island, illustrating its history. The author became acquainted with it in September 2015.

<sup>13</sup> The list of finalists was made up of: Field Operation/Wilkinson Eyre Architects New York, USA/London, United Kingdom; Hargreaves Associates/Michael Maltzan Architecture, Inc. New York, USA/Los Angeles, USA; Ramus Ella Architects (REX)/Michel Desvigne Paysagistes (MPD) New York, USA/Paris, France; West 8 urban design landscape architecture b.v./Rogers Marvel Architects/Diller Scofidio + Renfro Rotterdam, The Netherlands/New York, USA;WRT LLC/Weiss/Manfredi/Urban Strategies. Inc. Philadelphia, USA/New York, US /Toronto, Canada [5].

<sup>14</sup> West 8 is an international design office active in the area of interference of spatial planning and landscape architecture; apart from its registered office in the Netherlands, it has a branch in Belgium and, after winning the competition, also a branch in New York. Among many projects implemented in Europe it is worth paying attention to the participation of West 8 in the “City of Tomorrow” exhibition, which took place in 2001 in Malmö, with a strong emphasis on the issue of ecology and sustainable development, along with local landscape identity [18].

Opening of the island's surface for public use was preceded by numerous actions aimed at changing the image of Governors Island and promoting it as a new and attractive venue on the city map. Among numerous promotional and artistic events, the one whose scale went beyond the borders of the city was a temporary installation called The New York Waterfalls, presented in 2008 by the Public Art Fund in cooperation with the City of New York. One out of the four places of the display of forty-metre monumental waterfalls presented in the city landscape was Governors Island [19].

In May 2012, construction of the park based on the design concept selected in 2007 and the master plan prepared on its basis was commenced. Two years later, in May 2014, after completion of the first stage of the investment, the new recreational space of New York was opened for the public; completion of the second stage took place in June 2016.

## 6. Governors island – master plan

The plan, prepared in 2010, encompassed over 35 hectares out of the 70 hectares of the surface of Governors Island. The northern, historical part of the island received the status of public space, and the adaptation of functions of the historical development for the new needs was permitted. A surface area of over 16 hectares was assigned for the park, located in the central and the southern part of the island. One of the basic determinants of the plan was ensuring the continuity of the promenade, encompassing the island's circumference, with a length of 3.5 km. The remaining area, including the belt of land along the eastern and western coast, was assigned for the zone of development with absolute exclusion of residential function, yet allowing for hotel, conference and educational functions (Fig. 1).

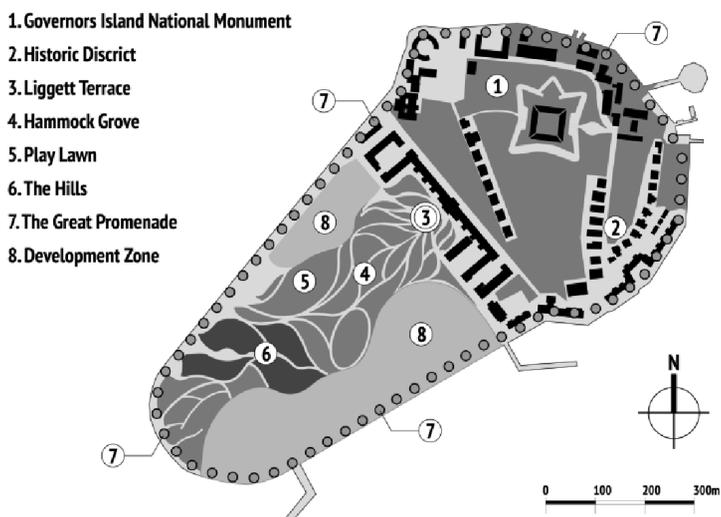


Fig. 1. Historical and modern forms of management – main functional zones (author's own study on the basis of information materials)

## 7. Park: main assumptions

Transformation of a military island, closed off to the public for several decades, into a public recreational space could have been evaluated as risky on account of numerous premises. In spite of successful examples of recycling New York's urban space and establishing parks in untypical locations, whose original functions have expired<sup>15</sup>, the case of Governors Island was marked with clear, specific limitations. The physical barrier of the waters of New York Bay and the absence of any tradition of the place related to public access, leisure and recreation of the transformed space could have been obstacles that were difficult to overcome. The design of the new park space had to assume an interdisciplinary adaptation of natural and cultural determinants of the island for the needs of space that was unique in the scale of the city, offering individual, broader and a more extensive utility programme than the remaining New York parks. The main assumptions included:

- ▶ creating an easily accessible, attractive public space, maintaining a balance between the cultural and the natural potential of the place<sup>16</sup>;
- ▶ protecting the park area from adverse and dangerous atmospheric phenomena: strong winds, high waves of the waters of the bay surrounding the island, and periodic flooding of its area;
- ▶ maximum extension and use of the landscape assets of the island as a unique element of an active exhibition related to the multidirectional reception of the city skyline<sup>17</sup>;
- ▶ introduction of individual solutions stimulating interaction with the park area and the surrounding landscape<sup>18</sup>;
- ▶ staging of the investment, making the completed fragments of the park available to users within a relatively short time and to a relatively extensive degree<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> A spectacular example of this phenomenon is *High Line Park*, where an overhead railway line was used as a base for creating a unique linear park [20, 21].

<sup>16</sup> The idea of preserving the historical and cultural heritage as the basis for constructing new park areas underlies multiple modern projects in New York; apart from the above-mentioned example of *The High Line*, it is worth mentioning *Gantry Plaza State Park* [22], where artefacts of the former reloading station from a railway line to the ferry line between New Jersey and Long Island are displayed, and *Concrete Plant Park* [23], adapting the area of the former concrete plant, along with its original technical infrastructure.

<sup>17</sup> The problem of displaying the unique Manhattan skyline from the perspective of such a unique place as a park was signalled as early as at the beginning of the 1970s by Robert Smithson [24] in his project *Study For Floating Island To Travel Around Manhattan* (implemented in 2005 in cooperation with, *inter alia*, the Whitney Museum of American Art); the valuable landscape relation which transformed a municipal park into a vantage point, directed towards the characteristic silhouette of Manhattan, has been used a number of times in modern park projects – apart from the already mentioned ones, such as *Gantry Plaza* or *Brooklyn Bridge Park*, it is also worth mentioning *Roosevelt Four Freedoms Park* (design: Louis Kahn 1972, opened in 2012) on Roosevelt Island, where the southern edge of the island was used as a unique vantage point, and, at the same time, a compositional and dramatic culmination for the commemorative space.

<sup>18</sup> Modern New York parks show clear formal differentiation resulting from the context of the place and rich design invention, manifested, *inter alia*, in composition, individual architectural details, selection of plants, etc. Diverse parks that make up Battery Park City, include: *Rockefeller Park*, *Teardrop Park*, *Iris Hunger Memorial*, *North Cove*, *Rector Park*.

<sup>19</sup> Investment staging did well with respect to a number of parks created in modern times; the process is visible using the example of linear *Hudson River Park*, which was initiated in 1997 and which is being opened to users

## 8. Design solutions

Fulfilment of the adopted assumptions required the application of a number of individual design solutions, clear both on the macro-scale of the created space, as well as the scale of details dedicated to it:

- ▶ in spite of the initial proposal of connecting the area of the island via a gondola lift with the area of Manhattan and Brooklyn<sup>20</sup>, mass transport between the island and the city relies on two ferry lines offering, initially seasonally, and nowadays year-round regular passenger cruises at affordable prices;
- ▶ the spatial composition of the new mode of managing Governors Island relies on a clear junction close to the geometric centre of the island (Fig. 1); a zone where the extensive historical architectural interior merges with the modern park design was planned in its vicinity (Liggett Terrace): an unhampered layout of the park with soft, undulating lines of pedestrian and bicycle alleys created an interesting contrast for the geometrically set out, post-military development of the island. The arrangement of the park made use of the natural isolation of the place and its separation from the dense urban space of New York – numerous recreational annexes were introduced, allowing for individual views of the surroundings and the landscape (Fig. 2);
- ▶ protection of the park from the effects of flooding of the island by the waters of New York Bay was solved by changing the original lie of the land: as a result of macro-levelling activities, the altitude coordinates of the central part of the park were increased, and clear drops were made towards the coastline (Fig. 3). In the southern part of the park, a series of controlled flood areas were made, supplemented with vegetation increasing their natural retention; protection from strong winds is provided by four artificially shaped hills located in the windward area of the island – a range of hills with extensive bases and heights ranging from 7 to almost 21 metres creates, at the same time, a natural breakwater shielding the area of the park and the interior of the island [26];
- ▶ the area of the island offers excellent conditions for multidirectional perception of the surrounding landscape – the promenade leading along the coastline is an efficient element of active landscape display ensuring reception of the dynamically changing landscape of New York Bay (an area of very intense navigation traffic) and the characteristic urban silhouette of Manhattan, New Jersey, Staten Island and Brooklyn within the full 360° (Fig. 4). The highest among the four planned hills will be a special vantage point – its height of 21 metres will ensure a unique, far-reaching view allowing

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successively, building the capital of trust and social approval necessary, apart from material funds, to continue the project.

<sup>20</sup> In 2005, Santiago Calatrava, at the request of the deputy mayor of New York, agreed to prepare a concept for connecting Governors Island with Manhattan and Brooklyn via a gondola lift, ensuring efficient communication between the Island and the city; a visually light structure resting on three structural pylons was going to, by assumption, introduce interesting and terse spatial forms into the landscape of the waters of New York Bay – the bold proposal was not implemented on account of the estimated high cost of the project [25].

for comprehensive reception of the characteristic city topography, along with its five main boroughs<sup>21</sup>;

- ▶ individual architectural details that highlight the cosy, human scale of the island and a wide array of functional forms were provided with great significance in the attractive management of the place. The applied solutions are conducive to interaction with the surrounding space and landscape – apart from classic stationary benches used in the historical part of the island, the park has also been provided with several types of portable furniture, and individual users can decide about its configuration and arrangement. The presence of places allowing for rest in a reclining position is a unique solution in the public space of New York<sup>22</sup>. An area provided with freely available hammocks turned out to be an attraction of the park [26] (Fig. 2). Special attention should also be paid to a playground with unique spatial forms (Fig. 5), encouraging not only the youngest park users to take part in physical activity. The open playground convention<sup>23</sup>, quite rare in New York, made use of the central, well-monitored area of the island;



Fig. 2. Hammock Grove: a boutique park interior with a view at the southern Manhattan skyline (source: photo by author)

<sup>21</sup> In the scale of the city this is the only publicly available vantage point with a view of the five main districts of the city.

<sup>22</sup> Even though the *Rules & Regulations of the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation*; § 1-04 Prohibited Uses do not clearly ban the use of benches in a reclining position, the majority of park benches have a structure preventing such use; the issue refers to the difficult and widespread problem of homeless people in the public space.

<sup>23</sup> Adults are not allowed to stay within the area of most playgrounds in New York, unless they accompany children younger than 12 years of age (*Rules & Regulations of the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation*; § 1-04 Prohibited Uses).

- implementation of the park project was planned in two stages: the first one, encompassing 12 hectares of the central area of the island, along with the zone of direct penetration with the historical development, was completed in May 2015; completion of the second stage, encompassing the southern edge of the island, is scheduled for June 2016. Making Governors Island widely available before the completion of the entire investment allowed the inhabitants of New York to have direct experience of the process of the creation of municipal space with respect to the basic earthwork, arrangement work, and providing the area of the island with greenery.



Fig. 3. The area of the park was shaped to provide protection from flooding and strong winds  
(source: photo by author)



Fig. 4. Promenade along the island provides views of the city skyline and the surrounding areas  
(source: photo by author)



Fig. 5. Spatial forms encouraging physical activity: an out-of-scale coat hanger as a piece of gym equipment (source: photo by author)

## 9. Recapitulation

The development of green areas conducted in the special conditions of New York's "Culture of Congestion" requires searching for new and untypical locations. Implying original formal and functional solutions that are implemented in the park on Governors Island is yet another example of this phenomenon.

The dominant function within the surface area of the island comprises public areas and a park. The zone of commercial development constitutes less than 20% of its surface, with a complete ban on locating residential development – this index determines clear preferences in shaping public city areas and is worth emphasising in the context of very strong investment pressure characterising New York.

The park created on Governors Island, in a manner characteristic for numerous modern park investments established in New York, makes references to urban space; apart from its basic function within the scope of shaping green and recreational areas, it creates a high standard for public city areas, protects and displays its cultural heritage, and contributes to forming the structure of interesting landscape relations within its area.

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