New York City: The View from Governors Island
Douglas Tallack (University of Leicester)

Abstract

Governors Island is only 800 yards from the tip of Manhattan but remains virtually unknown to most New Yorkers. Overlooked by gleaming skyscrapers on some of the most expensive real estate in the world, Governors Island has been on the edge of New York City’s history and, until very recently, has been a notable absence from both large- and small-scale developments in the Lower Manhattan and harbour area.

Developments such as Battery Park City on the Hudson River and South Street Seaport on the East River have had a global significance in urban debates, and are used in the essay as perspectives upon the island and its future. However, in the post-9/11 period, Governors Island, as a local site with global potential, also highlights debates within New York urbanism, and helps to frame key questions about the relationship between civic and commercial imperatives.

1. Introduction: An overlooked island

An apocryphal story circulates among United States Coast Guards of a midnight rollerblader, who set off from Manhattan through the Battery Tunnel but came up an airshaft onto Governors Island. The following morning he was found wandering around, convinced there had been an emergency evacuation of Staten Island.

Regional Map, 23 October 2006. Courtesy of Governors Island Preservation and Education Corporation

---

1 For an aerial film, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IsV6tZNkFzs.
2 The definite article and the apostrophe were gradually dropped from The Governor’s Island and it is known as Governors Island.

At 172 acres, Governors Island is the largest but least well known of the three islands immediately off the tip of Manhattan. While strategically important because of its geographical location protecting the bay, it has been on the periphery of New York City’s history. Its historic buildings are impressive, but none has the resonance of the structures on Liberty Island or Ellis Island. Neither has Governors Island, until recently, figured in any of the dramatic schemes, implemented within global parameters, for the continuing development of Lower Manhattan and the harbour. This is surprising, if only because the early national coastal forts, the Victorian and Romanesque Revival architecture of Nolan Park, McKim, Mead and White’s Liggett Hall on Colonels’ Row, and abandoned leisure facilities within the crumbling suburban landscape of the island are overlooked by the city’s skyscrapers, themselves clustered on some of the most expensive real estate in the world.

Governors Island. Courtesy of Tom Clinard, Governors Island History and Tour Photographs by Christina M. Wilkinson

Decisions are being made, and will be made over the next few years, that will immediately determine the next phase in the history of Governors Island and offer another perspective, from 800 yards off-shore, on the planning and architectural debates centring on Lower Manhattan and the revitalisation of the harbour. A shorthand version of those debates would have them bookended by the vigorous criticisms offered by Jane Jacobs (and others) of the dramatic urban destruction and reconstruction during the 1960s and 1970s, and September 11, 2001. The destruction, through terrorist attacks, of the World Trade Center curtailed those debates, only to initiate a new phase of redevelopment and accompanying arguments over civic and commercial means and ends that have now encompassed the lost world of Governors Island.

Governors Island is so overlooked, in both senses of the word, that it may be useful to introduce it, both visually and historically. There are 225 structures on the island, including 62 historic structures, of which Castle Williams, the Admiral’s House, Liggett Hall, and Fort Jay are the most notable:

---

Castle Williams. Author’s photograph

Admiral’s House. Author’s photograph

Liggett Hall, Author’s photograph
Governors Island has appeared and disappeared throughout the city’s history, as the timeline provided by the Governors Island Preservation and Education Corporation (GIPEC) helps us appreciate (see Appendix). Following various changes of ownership during the colonial period, in 1800 Governors Island was ceded by the State of New York to the Federal government. In 1821 the Army of the East took over Governors Island as its headquarters, but in 1878 a shift from military fort to administrative centre took place. In 1903, management formally passed to the United States Army and this phase lasted until its departure in 1965. The year after, control passed to the US Coast Guard, and Governors Island became its largest base.

Economics and politics have featured in Governors Island’s history, in a mirror image of New York City’s history. The island had been used intermittently by the Dutch since the 1620s and was known as Noten Eyland, a name that may derive...
from ‘pagganck’, the Native American name meaning ‘the island of many nut trees’. It passed to British ownership with the occupation of New Amsterdam in 1664, and was known as Nutten Island, thereby maintaining the reference to its crops of chestnut, hickory and oak nuts. The island was also a source of timber and a sawmill was constructed during this period. In 1698 the British identified the island for the use of His Majesty’s governors and signalled its future uses, bringing to an end the buying and selling of the land and inaugurating its new name, The Governor’s Island.

Until the very recent past, the economic value of the island has rarely featured again in commentary. Governors Island has assumed a military and, occasionally, a diplomatic career since the War of Independence. In 1776 it was held for a few months by General Putnam for the Americans before Admiral Howe took it for the British, who occupied it until 1783, when they surrendered it to Governor George Clinton of New York State in 1783. Two hundred years later, in 1988, Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev held a summit meeting in the Admiral’s House. Governors Island, then, has had a ‘what might have been’ history, either by-passed entirely, or assigned a supporting role in many major conflicts. Castle Williams, for example, held Confederate prisoners and, in common with other buildings, housed administrative operations for the military. If its important role as the headquarters of the US Coast Guard was known to at least some New Yorkers across the bay, far fewer would have been aware of the time capsule of mid-twentieth-century Americana contained on the island, including a Super 8 motel, cinema, bowling alley and Burger King, which had been built to service federal personnel and their families.¹

Had New York City assumed a political, rather than primarily a commercial vocation, then, arguably, Governors Island might now be as well-known

¹ Lisa Kereszi and Andrew Moore, Governors Island: Photographs. Courtesy Lisa Kereszi and Andrew Moore

Lisa Kereszi and Andrew Moore, Governors Island: Photographs. Courtesy Lisa Kereszi and Andrew Moore

Had New York City assumed a political, rather than primarily a commercial vocation, then, arguably, Governors Island might now be as well-known

as Ellis and Liberty islands. In one scenario, what eventually became the White House in Washington DC could conceivably have been located on Governors Island. The story of Governors Island now becomes part of contemporary history and the remainder of this essay analyses the situation c. 2005-2008, leaving the end of the story for follow-up research.

Several notable dates in the recent timeline of Governors Island help to frame the arguments at the centre of this essay, but I would make the point that telling the story of urban developments has an analytical purpose itself. Moving too swiftly to conceptual positions can fail to do justice to the process and the complexities of those positions in situ, as it were. By way of a selective recent timeline, we may note the following events.

1976: The public visited Governors Island for the first time, and the Island played host to 18,000 visitors during the Fourth of July weekend.

1983: On another auspicious 200-year anniversary for the United States, Burger King opened an outlet on Governors Island.

1997: The US Coast Guard’s *The Reservist* reported, under the heading, ‘Governors Island Memories, June 1996 to September 1997’, that:

> Once a bustling haven for Coast Guard men and women, Governors Island is now eerily quiet and empty. The Coast Guard officially departed Sept. 30, 1997 after a low-key but nostalgic ceremony. Now, only a 61-person caretaking detachment remains and a tugboat has replaced the ferry. Early last summer, "The Reservist" began asking its readers for their "Governors Island Memories" as a way of documenting the Coast Guard’s 31 years on this special place just a short ferry ride from the hustle and bustle of lower Manhattan.5

2001: President Clinton designated 22 acres, including Castle Williams and Fort Jay, as the Governors Island National Monument, an act apparently traceable to a 1995 conversation between Clinton and Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, while in a helicopter flying over New York Harbor.

2002: On 2 April 2002, President George W. Bush, Governor Pataki, and Mayor Bloomberg ended mounting local concern by announcing the sale of Governors Island by the federal government to the people of New York for a nominal cost, later revealed as $1.

2003: The National Monument was transferred to the Secretary for the Interior and the care of the National Park Service. The official White House press release of 31 January 2003 confirmed the return of Governors Island to the City and State of New York, and announced the establishment of The Governors Island Preservation and Education Corporation (GIPEC), with equal representation on its Board from City and State.

---

2. The National Park Service (NPS) and Governors Island Preservation and Education Corporation (GIPEC)

The ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ page on the website of the National Park Service responded to local concern in 2003:

What are ‘they’ going to do with the island?
It depends upon who the ‘they’ are.6

Two organisations on Governors Island were entrusted with its future. The first is the National Park Service (NPS), traditionally regarded in a favourable light by the public. Its tours of the island are a model of helpful informality, operating within the confines of current conditions; that is, an hourly ferry service and a landscape that is unprepared, as yet, for large-scale public use. To visit feels like stepping back decades, and tour parties sometimes include the children of armed services personnel who may last have been on the island in the 1950s.7 The second, the Governors Island Preservation and Education Corporation (GIPEC), is a joint city–state entity:

A subsidiary of the Empire State Development Corporation, GIPEC is overseen by a Board of Directors appointed equally by the Governor and Mayor of New York. GIPEC is working closely with a wide array of constituent groups, including the National Park Service, business, community and civic groups to foster new ideas for development of Governors Island and to enhance the Island’s role as a vital and integral part of New York City and the surrounding region. GIPEC seeks to make Governors Island a destination with great public open space and heritage tourism attractions, as well as education, conference and cultural arts facilities.8

7 For reminiscences by Mary Ferreira, who visited on October 28th, 2006, and other former residents, see http://www.nysun.com/comments/203.
8 See http://www.empire.state.ny.us/Subsidiaries_Projects/GIPEC.html.
Since 2001, with the revival of interest in, and concern for, the future of Governors Island, geography and topography have weighed more heavily than history. The 22 acres of the National Monument on Governors Island includes Castle Williams and Fort Jay, and are under the authority of the National Park Service, and therefore no longer subject to Public Law 105–33 1997, under which this area could have been included within any sale of the entire island. Presidential Proclamation 7647, of February 7 2003, noted that the National Monument’s ‘proximity to lower Manhattan also makes it an appropriate location from which to reflect upon the tragic events of September 11, 2001.’ Governors Island Preservation and Education Corporation controls 150 acres: 70 acres of the Historic Landmark District, the remaining 22 acres being under the control of the National Park Service, and 80 acres in the south of the Island.

For NPS, the timeline for development is short and the objectives clear and focussed on the area enclosed by a light blue line, above. The GIPEC timeline is likely to be more extended, however, and the continuing narrative of its phase of guardianship highlights the competing influences in contemporary urban development.

---


3. The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation

Within the City and State of New York, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) may be considered as providing the context for the debate over Governors Island:

The LMDC was created in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, by Governor George Pataki and then-Mayor Rudolph Giuliani to help plan and co-ordinate the rebuilding and revitalization of Lower Manhattan, defined as everything south of Houston Street. The LMDC is a joint state–city corporation that works with its partners in the public and private sectors to co-ordinate long-term planning for the World Trade Center site and surrounding communities while pursuing short-term initiatives to improve the quality of life in Lower Manhattan during the revitalization effort.\(^\text{10}\)

In April 2002, with Governors Island linked to the city’s recovery after the World Trade Center disaster, President George W. Bush confirmed that the nominal sale of the island to the City and State of New York would go ahead. The city and state committed $5 million each for three years to ensure maintenance and cover the costs of the planning process.

With the focus firmly on city and state, Mayor Bloomberg’s New York City’s Vision for Lower Manhattan was presented 12 December 2002.\(^\text{11}\) It included Governors Island, alongside a number of other key East River Waterfront redevelopments that are also worth exploring. The Vision notes that if Manhattan’s waterfront parks (both proposed and existing) are added to the proposed Brooklyn Bridge Park and Governors Island, then the total area of 400 acres is almost half of what Central Park provides. More is made in the document of the official entrance to Governors Island, namely a refurbished Battery Maritime Building in Manhattan, than of the island itself. However, the following year, when, after 200 years, Governors Island was officially returned to the people of New York City and State, the announcement stipulated that the island would be used for public benefit, and deed restrictions were imposed against permanent housing and casinos. Since then, the onus has been on GIPEC to be inclusive and transparent in its call for proposals, as well as to operate within business-like parameters. GIPEC’s formation was an important milestone in private–public relationships, particularly in the context of larger debates stretching back to the 1966 Lower Manhattan Plan, though the end of the story is far from clear.

4. ‘Seeking “World’s Greatest Ideas” for 172-Acre Island in New York Harbor’

The official rhetoric and photographs in the 2002 and 2003 press releases from the White House and the offices of the Governor and Mayor announcing the transfer of


Governors Island from the federal government to the city and state smoothed over a period in which action groups had wondered whether the handover would ever happen. On 30 March 2005, a Request for Expressions of Interest (RFEI) was issued by GIPEC. Expressions of interest, which included the National Historic Monument or the Battery Maritime Building, were to be considered jointly by the National Park Service and New York City Economic Development Corporation respectively.

The basis for the uncertainty over what to do with Governors Island that existed between 2002 and 2005 and, as it turns out, that continued into the period initiated by the 2005 Request for Expressions of Interest (GIPEC) is a serious underlying financial and managerial issue. Gian-Claudia Sciara reported in City Limits for August–September 1997 that, following the departure of the Coast Guard,

the federal General Service Administration (GSA) [has been left] to seek out a new owner. GSA is looking first to see if there is a federal, state or city agency willing to maintain the island for public use. If it can’t, however, the property could go on the block for private sale sometime in the next few years.\(^\text{12}\)

In the late 1990s, the Guiliani administration had been quite interested in locating a casino and hotel complex on the island because income from gambling, it was thought, would more than pay for the upkeep of the island’s historic buildings. More recently, Nicolai Ouroussoff remarked in The New York Times that

It’s the kind of choice development site that would have made an old-school planning czar like Robert Moses salivate: 172 acres of waterfront property just off the tip of Manhattan. Yet city and state officials clearly are at a loss about what to do with Governors Island.\(^\text{13}\)

Governors Island was also considered to be a prime site for top-end residential development, provided that public transportation was assured. This remains an option if GIPEC’s planning process falters, to the extent that the prohibition on private residential development is eroded or even lifted. Against such options, some New York legislators and many civic groups have lobbied the federal government for public access and use, citing the island’s historical importance, as well as its recreational and tourist potential.

The Regional Plan Association (RPA), which convened the Governors Island Alliance, entered early into the debate. The Alliance had backing from, among others, the American Institute of Architects, the American Planning Association, the Friends of Hudson River Park, the Municipal Art Society, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, New Yorkers for Parks, and the Waterfront Parks Coalition, and focused specifically on parks and historic preservation. Its aim is to ensure that redevelopment results in ‘a grand civic space with educational and recreational attractions for New Yorkers and tourists alike’. The argument is advanced most


comprehensively in the Alliance’s *Governors Island: Guidelines for Parks and Public Spaces*.14

There was a good deal of stalling while the city and state leaders contemplated possible $10 million annual maintenance and transportation costs, as well as an assessment by the Department of City Planning that it would cost anywhere between $25 and $40 million to create full public access and a ferry service. Congress had stated that Governors Island should be sold by the end of 2002, and hung a $500 million price-tag on it, deriving from the Balanced Budget Act of 1997, which included $500 million revenue from the sale of Governors Island. The sale price was later revised downward to $300 million.

By mid-2001, the mood of pessimism had changed, but *City Limits* remained cautious about the financial obstacles when reporting in July that year that Governor Pataki had, at last, put forward a plan to the federal government on an alternative usage for Governors Island, amid fears that it could be sold off to private developers:

any developer will have to spend $34.7 million just to upgrade the island’s facilities—some of which date back to the early 19th century—before any real construction can be done…. Another $109.1 million, the report says, would be needed to build the 46-acre park and to construct or rehab the island’s facilities. Given these costs, state planners ask, what businessperson in his right mind would be willing to spend an additional $300 million just to get hold of the property?

To date, the answer has been ‘no one’. The federal government has yet to receive a bid for the land, according to a spokesperson at the General Services Administration.15

This formal stage in the planning process was heralded on the GIPEC website as a call by Governor Pataki and Mayor Bloomberg for the ‘World’s Greatest Ideas’ for the island. GIPEC’s two-page preservation and redevelopment opportunity flyer set out the requirements for usage, handed down by the federal government, for the north and south of the island. Of the 80 acres of ‘blank slate’ land to the south of the National Historic Landmark District, 40 acres should be public park and esplanade, with commercial development permitted on the remainder. The latter could cater to the areas of hospitality, arts and entertainment, retail, recreation, business, health or education. Restrictions applied to gambling, power plants, industrial or manufacturing facilities and residential accommodation unconnected to hospitality, health or education facilities. GIPEC set strong restrictions, laid down in the Governors Island quit claim deed of 31 January 2003. In keeping with the public benefit objective, redevelopment must ensure meaningful access is available to the public, as well as providing appropriate transportation. Beginning in the summer of 2003, the island was opened to sponsored tours and special events. A limited free public ferry service then became available, though systemic transportation has been a major concern.

---


GIPEC’s thoughts were set out in a short- and long-term transportation plan which refers to ‘possibly establishing new alternate modes of travel … Getting to Governors Island should be a unique waterfront experience.’ At GIPEC’s announcement of Requests for Proposals on 15 February 2006, architect Santiago Calatrava was present with Mayor Bloomberg and Governor Pataki and the most dramatic of the ‘alternate modes’ was presented: an aerial gondola. Curbed, an active neighbourhood real estate blog, with a New York City branch dating from 2004, was quickly on the imaginary scene with an image captioned ‘Santiago Calatrava has lost his mind.’

More routinely, but more tangibly, the New York Water Taxi started running a weekend service from Brooklyn to Governors Island from the end of May 2007, supplementing what will be the base-line ferry service from the Battery Maritime Building. Through phone-ins, emails and blogs, Brooklynites have made known their view that the 400 yard transit to Governors Island from Red Hook and Fulton Ferry should be a formal part of Governors Island transportation.

5. Developing the ‘Governors Island Experience’

Governors Island was rolled into the developing concept of an ‘emerging harbor district’ and a ‘world-class destination’ at least as early as Bloomberg’s mayoral Vision in 2002. While these phrases evoke, respectively, the gentrification schemes further up the island of Manhattan and at South Street Seaport, the driving

---

motivations of each were worthy enough: increased parkland, improved access and the creation of ‘low-energy, high-quality and environmentally responsive buildings [in] high-quality, ecologically responsive landscapes.’ A refurbished Battery Maritime Building will be the main ferry terminal and official entrance to Governors Island. Heritage- and tourism-inspired language has been used in talk of the ‘Governors Island Experience’ beginning for visitors at this building in Manhattan, currently the home of GIPEC.

Battery Maritime Building from Governors Island. Author’s photograph

The initial process has been a model of transparency and consultation, structured around workshops, networking sessions, public meetings, tours, Q&A sessions and correspondence, and interviews. However, difficulties have arisen where they commonly do in any planning process: from the structural tension between civic and commercial drives. These may be best followed in this case through a series of announcements, documents and key dates.

On 25 March 2005, GIPEC issued its Development Framework. With an extended deadline for Request for Expressions of Interest, some ninety responses were received by GIPEC from ‘developers and investors around the world.’ In September of the same year, GIPEC offered four template visions to assist the process. Running only a little late (15 February 2006) against the most optimistic of schedules, GIPEC issued a Request for Proposals for the ‘Preservation and Development of the Island’, arrived at after reviewing the ninety-plus initial expressions of interest. In announcing the Request for Proposals, Governor Pataki and Mayor Bloomberg confirmed an additional $60 million from State and City to

make the total committed $120 million.\textsuperscript{20} By 10 May, twenty-five responses were received to the Request for Proposals, from across the spectrum of developers to educational institutions to not-for-profit organisations. There was a mix of whole-island proposals and component proposals. Interviews with ten respondents were held over the summer. On 23 October 2006, GIPEC issued a Request for Statement of Qualification for Public Open Space Professional Design Services for anticipated park, waterfront and other open spaces, for an extended submission deadline of 1 December 2006. The next step was for GIPEC to identify probably five teams who would enter a design competition.

The process outlined above came to a disappointing conclusion at the GIPEC Board meeting on 13 November 2006, following which a press release was issued:

GIPEC will not be designating a developer or development team at this time. … According to the Selection Committee, none of the whole island proposals met enough of the high standards set out in the RFP selection criteria, including a coherent vision supported by market data, financial return and funding sources, combined with the depth of team experience that would be expected as part of a deal to justify a designation.\textsuperscript{21}

According to AM New York City editor Michael Clancy, in ‘School Plan Afloat’,

[GIPEC] is going back to the drawing board to pick a development partner. The agency will not accept any proposals from 10 finalists—from a Nickelodeon theme park to a CUNY campus—selected after the agency requested proposals in February.\textsuperscript{22}

Only one of the ‘component’ proposals, to relocate the New York Harbor School from Brooklyn to the island, will be taken forward. ‘We are just thrilled,’ said Murray Fisher, the Harbor School’s program director. ‘To be located in the middle of New York harbor, it’s a dream come true.’ ‘It’s a really positive thing,’ said Robert Pirani, of the Governors Island Alliance, a coalition of nonprofit groups formed to ensure the island is used properly. ‘It sets the tone for the island as being a place for New York City, for being about education, for being about the harbor—as opposed to being a casino, which has nothing to do with those things.’\textsuperscript{23}

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{23}] Quoted in Clancy, ‘School Plan Afloat, n.p.
\end{itemize}
6. Disappointment and a renewed environmental vision

In November 2006 the GIPEC board concluded that pressing on with environmental planning for a 2.2 mile waterfront esplanade to encircle the island, and 40 acres of parkland in the southwest, plus continued commitment to the open spaces of the Historic District, would encourage better proposals from commercial developers. The president of the GIPEC Board, Leslie Koch, remained positive that Governors Island would receive sufficient commercial and not-for-profit enterprises to sustain the original vision. To this end, renderings, reminiscent of those that preceded the construction of the more famous Battery Park City Esplanade on Lower Manhattan, discussed below, were distributed at the 13 November GIPEC board meeting, one of which did express the commercial hope for a hotel and similar attractions and facilities.

In spite of the brave face put on by Leslie Koch, the sceptical and even cynical tone returned. NewYorkBusiness.com was harsh in its predictive headline of 13 September 2006: ‘Governors Island Proposals to be Trashed’. The costs of the proposals were thought to be too high, and this cut across GIPEC’s aim to reconcile civic and commercial impulses. In the maelstrom of New York City development politics GIPEC was an easy target for media wit and the public’s comments. Curbed poked fun at the park and waterfront renderings in an article the day after the 13 November GIPEC board meeting: ‘New Fake Plans for Governors Island Unveiled!’:

What’s in and out in the latest Governors thinking? A Curbed primer: IN: The New York Harbor School, which will occupy a ‘small part’ of the island (lucky bastards). IN: Amazingly, The Gondola, still (presumably to be scuttled once its hype purposes are exhausted). OUT: A children’s theme park plan from Nickelodeon (damn!). OUT: Any hope a master developer will be selected ‘for quite a while’. OUT: Our general patience with anything Governors Island-related. … Ahead: three more renderings of things that will never actually exist!

Curbed readers had seen the signs early. In the 13 September 2006 edition, comments ranged from:

How to make this work: CASINO. No new yorker in their right mind is going to go for any other reason. By Anonymous at September 13, 2006. [To] Without a vision, the people perish. Like Ground Zero, Atlantic Yards, the West Side and any other development, NY can do little more than navel gaze. Thank you Pataki and Bloomberg. This island should be home to thousands of people. A few glorious towers could welcome people into NY Harbor. Why not the world’s tallest on this site? By GrandPa at September 13, 2006. [Via] Why not just build a Walmart or a

park only for members of the New York Health and Racquet Club. Yay! Progress!
By Nolte at September 13, 2006.  

An idea that had been around since 1946—to locate the United Nations on Governors Island—resurfaced, but in tandem with an overt challenge to what was perceived as an anti-free-market GIPEC bias. The New York Post had this to say on 18 November 2006:

The Governors Island Preservation and Education Corp.—a city–state entity—should again revisit an idea that was first suggested nearly 60 years ago: Move the United Nations onto the island. Such an outcome would satisfy New York’s Rule One on the conversion of public land to other purposes: First and last, nobody must ever make an honest dollar on the deal. Governors Island is perfect for luxury housing. Properly configured, such a use could generate hundreds of millions of dollars dedicated to a worthy public purpose—say, school construction. Fat chance of that, though: It would generate profits for the private (that is, the taxpaying) sector (see Rule One.)

- Open prime East Side real estate for development. The same public-purpose linkage could work here, too—much as Battery Park City has spun off hundreds of millions to underwrite low-income housing elsewhere in the city.
- Put all U.N. personnel in one spot, instead of leaving them spread all over Manhattan, as is now the case. This would make it easier to keep an eye on the spies and the Oil-for-Food grafters; diplomats with unpaid parking tickets could be kept off the ferry to Manhattan.
- Make moot the U.N.’s current land grab—it’s been trying to take over Robert Moses Park as part of an expansion scheme.
- So. What’s not to like about putting the United Nations on Governors Island? In a word: Nothing. Let’s just do it.

Winter 2006-07 was a difficult time for GIPEC, inadvertently conveyed by the National Park Service’s routine announcement:

Governors Island is closed for the Season: Governors Island National Monument closed for the summer season on September 2, 2006. Public access resumes in early or mid-June 2007. Until that time, requests to visit the island cannot be honored. Details on ferry schedules, ferry departure points and ticket prices change every year. Information about access to Governors Island and programs for the 2007 summer season will be announced in May, 2007. We look forward to seeing you then.

---


7. From The Lower Manhattan Plan to post-9/11

Only when the new internal configuration of Governors Island and its relationship with both the city and the world are known can conclusions be formulated on the significance of this project, though, in the final section of this essay we can return for an update. Perhaps more important than the outcome of the planning and development process is the future use of the island by individuals and institutions, and that will be a continuing story.

Even at this indeterminate point in the process, we can usefully contextualise the signs of changing priorities on Governors Island by referring to debates over Lower Manhattan that date back to The Lower Manhattan Plan of 1966, and moving forward in time to look at the incremental developments at South Street Seaport, the proposals for an East River Esplanade and the maturing of Battery Park City. In her 2002 introduction to The Lower Manhattan Plan: The 1966 Vision for Downtown New York, Carol Willis succinctly describes the situation at that time as simultaneously urgent and dire if Lower Manhattan was to retain its world financial authority and surmount the following physical and structural disadvantages:

- the twists and turns of the streets, south of the grid layout, that impeded movement of people and goods
- the elevated highways that had sought to relieve traffic congestion but only separated people and businesses from the waterfront
- the decline of the Port of New York, and the legacy of rotting piers and largely unusable buildings fronting onto a polluted bay. 29

Despite the notable absence of the World Trade Center, the gleaming towers of Lower Manhattan today point to some of the successes of the often-criticised 1966 Plan, as well as subsequent developments, in matching midtown’s corporate growth and globally signalling New York’s renewed financial power. The obvious intent of the Plan to achieve a corporate comeback was linked, somewhat half-heartedly at first but later more persuasively, with the development of precincts for leisure, culture and housing. Among the key sites identified on the interactive map on the Downtown Alliance’s website, when traversing the tip of Manhattan from the Hudson to the East River are: Battery Park City and Esplanade; the ribbon of small parks south from Rockefeller Park; the Museum of Jewish Heritage; an enhanced Battery Park; the slips on the East River; and South Street Seaport. 30

Today there are fewer obvious heroes and villains than in the years when Robert Moses combined the attributes of both as he re-sculpted the city’s transportation skeleton. 31 Within a planning and economic environment still weighted towards corporate power, there are more continuities than one would expect between private and public endeavours, and between environmental priorities and those embodied in mirrored towers and atria. The continuities are not to be taken for granted; many have been hard-won by community, civic and professional

associations, as much as by the concessions agreed to by developers in the shape of different means to the same corporate ends.

Just as nearby sites are among the reference points for contextualising current thinking about Governors Island, some of those sites are, in turn, illuminated when one looks at the city and its current redevelopment from the perspective afforded by deliberations over Governors Island. The on-going public–private discussions on the current Governors Island re-development can be glimpsed, in a very different era, within the Department of City Planning’s 1966 Plan. Although blatantly a corporate-driven vision, there was some common ground between the commercial and civic impulses inasmuch as the physical features, especially along the waterfront, urgently needed addressing in enlightened ways if the drift of financial power to midtown and, as we can see in retrospect, to financial centres in Asia was to be halted.

The relationship between corporate structures, reaching imperiously to the sky, and more low-key, low-rise and private or semi-civic structures is complicated and changes over time. The appearance of leisure, culture and housing complexes in New York’s post-1960s cityscape was accompanied by the disappearance, or at least the lack of expansion, of low-income housing projects. Housing subsidies were on the decline in the financial crises of the 1970s. In the financial war, locally against midtown, but globally against Frankfurt, London, Hong Kong, and Tokyo, the media image of a recovery downtown helped to manage a poverty gap. Yet development has not been wholly one-sided, even if, in the thirty years after the Plan, there is rather little at the purely public end of the spectrum. Telling this story of confused community and corporate means and ends is itself a form of analysis, though admittedly less clear-cut than theoretical critique, of which one example will have to suffice. The tension between haptic and visual methodologies runs through much of the literature of urbanism, and is captured in Guy Debord and the Situationists’ pronouncement: ‘That which changes our way of seeing the streets is more important than what changes our way of seeing painting.’

Although the visual has been greatly expanded by the profusion of computer-generated images—for example, GIPEC’s projections of the proposed waterfront on the island or Santiago Calatrava’s vision of an aerial gondola or, in a more heightened manner, by the plans for the World Trade Center site—the varying experiences of a place remain a key test of its meaning, albeit a test that stretches over many years as a place matures and is embedded or fails to be embedded in the fabric of the city. That test, incidentally, can be usefully employed against an ideological critique that seeks to reveal, in Christine Boyer’s formulation, an unacknowledged complicity with real estate forces and government economic development policies.

---

32 For a selective bibliography of related urban studies, see the Introduction to this collection.
In the summary section of the *Lower Manhattan Plan*, the aggressive corporate strategy is dominant. However, it is some of the less prominent pronouncements that have resonated more post-9/11 than in the first thirty years following the Plan. Two of the redeveloped sites on the tip of Manhattan provide particularly useful historical and contemporary points of references to assess what is currently underway in Lower Manhattan and the harbour.

8. South Street Seaport and the Heritage Boom

![South Street Seaport, from Brooklyn Bridge. Author’s photograph](image)

The 1966 *Lower Manhattan Plan* was not strong on conservation and, where it did surface, there were ambiguous results that contrast with how strongly this issue has been highlighted in the Governors Island scheme, particularly in the period since the call for commercial proposals foundered in November 2006. The South Street Seaport Museum was established in 1967 on Schermerhorn Row, a block-long 1812 building on Fulton Street from Front to South streets, but these and nearby buildings were nearly sacrificed in favour of residential redevelopment. Ironically, the museum proved to be a wedge for the retail development hinted at elsewhere in the Plan’s summary. With New York’s economy regaining strength in the 1980s, South Street Seaport became part of the heritage boom associated, as Christine Boyer notes in *The City of Collective Memory* (1994), with Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco and Quincy Market in Boston, but also, with similar reconstructions in London and Paris.\(^\text{36}\)

The original early nineteenth-century buildings at South Street Seaport now accommodate the stereotypical late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century activities of a heritage mall, the manifestation of the kind of struggle between

---

\(^{36}\) Lily Kong’s essay, in this collection, similarly explains the historical resonances of the CHIJMES complex in Singapore.
preservation and development that marks a number of the Lower Manhattan and harbour schemes. Boyer refers to ‘these open-air bazaars and storehouses of heterogeneity’, and highlights the way in which these ‘leftover “working” districts … warehouses … waterfronts’ have been recycled into ‘food-oriented and clothing emporiums packaging a specific style of life.’

Heritage street sign, South Street Seaport
Author’s photograph

The to-ing and fro-ing between the interests of preservation and development from 1966 to the late 1980s—by which time South Street Seaport had become largely what we see today—tells a story in which the balance shifted decisively towards, as Boyer ironically puts it, ‘the idea of restructuring the Seaport into a retail shopping center with a historic maritime theme.’ The construction in 1981 of Pier 17 as a shopping mall signalled how far this shift towards commercial development had gone. From her perspective, in 1994, Boyer predicted that this ‘flagship project of Manhattan’s waterfront restructuring’ would attract further private investment. It might have been expected, then, that the outlying streets and notable blots on the historic district’s landscape would be, respectively, developed and cleaned up.

The commercial vision has faltered somewhat, even though the South Street Seaport website has remained upbeat. The mall information is a predictable mix of culture and commerce. Pat Arnow in The Gotham Gazette in February 2006 is blunt:

Worse is Pier 17, the South Street Seaport shopping and dining complex, which was built in 1983 to energize the neighborhood, but never lived up to expectations. After

the World Trade Center fell less than a mile away, it became comatose. Most of the businesses are surviving on month-to-month leases; there are empty storefronts.39

South Street itself remains a blemish, and not so different from the way it looked in the 1960s and 1970s, with some buildings derelict and others in a poor state of repair.40 And, most damagingly from the perspective of an urban tableau, the street remains overshadowed by FDR Drive, while the tree-lined South Street envisaged in one of the models for the waterfront is still only a vision.

9. South Street Seaport Today

General Growth, which owned the mall on Pier 17 until sold to Howard Hughes Properties, considered a complete redevelopment. ‘We’re looking at everything that would be of service to the neighborhood including retail, dining, entertainment, hotels,’ said Michael Piazzola, the company’s general manager for the project. Pat Arnow was doubtful, given the style of other General Growth malls, but concluded by expressing some ‘hope for graceful redevelopment. General Growth has commissioned plans from the architecture firm of Beyer Blinder Belle, the company that refurbished Grand Central Terminal so beautifully.’41 The existing visual signs around South Street Seaport are difficult to interpret, with plenty of property to rent off the main streets, as is apparent from downloadable information on General Growth Properties Inc’s website.

Sciame Development’s Historic Front Street project sought to balance preservation and commercial development by building expensive new and renovated apartments, while introducing a green agenda that was not a part of the 1970s and 1980s construction and re-construction of South Street Seaport.42 Sciame Development also opted for an iconic building to (re-)kick-start the South Street Seaport area. Number 80 South Street, designed by Santiago Calatrava, was presented in a video tour of these apartments, which each had a starting price of $29 million. As the video camera looked out from the proposed site, it paused on Governors Island, as though speculating on the opportunities that it offered architects and developers.43

The Fulton Fish Market, founded in 1822, was also located on South Street until its relocation to the Bronx in 2005. It will be interesting to see whether much changes in the wake of its closure. Andrew Jacobs reported in the New York Times on 11 November 2005 that

43 In spite of heavy media coverage, including an interview with the architect, the project was cancelled in 2008.

the rough-edged men who work at the seaport found themselves overcome with memory and emotion. On the old market’s last night of operation, they eagerly posed for the tourists blocking the fish-choked aisles, railed against the evils of gentrification and offered up syrupy soliloquies to overbearing reporters. ‘I don’t like it one bit,’ said a fillet man named Bobby DiGregorio, better known as Bobby Tuna. ‘The city is throwing away its history. One day, there’s going to be a Banana Republic where I’m standing. I guess it’s progress, but like I said, I don’t like it one bit.’ 44

According to the authors of the 1966 Plan:

One final possible use [after residential and office space] relates to the retail and restaurants in the Community Plaza at the end of Fulton Street. It should be feasible and desirable to continue a small and much more elegant fish-market activity geared to the seafood restaurants and speciality stores. In an atmosphere of drying nets and other maritime paraphernalia, and seafood sold from permanently-anchored fishing boats, the community’s shopping center can take on a unique flavour. 45

Front Street and Fulton Fish Market
under FDR Drive, South Street Seaport
Author’s photograph

In 1966 it was envisaged that the fish market would be moved to Hunt’s Point, where its unpleasant smells and vehicular and pedestrian traffic congestion would no longer disturb potential residents and retail clients of South Street Seaport. The failure to assimilate the fish market into subsequent retail development typified by its neighbouring Pier 17 is apparent in the kind of image (above) that does not appear on the South Street Seaport website.


If we return to Mayor Bloomberg’s *New York City’s Vision for Lower Manhattan* of 2002, the plans for South Street Seaport are showcased, particularly in the ‘New Esplanade’ section of the presentation. The New Esplanade, with pavilions and cladding attached to the underside of FDR Drive ‘to improve lighting, sound, and appearance’ would address one of the challenges spelt out in the 1966 *Lower Manhattan Plan*, as well as providing improved access to the waterfront. In place of the Fulton Fish Market building, the 2002 *Vision* suggested a mixed-use maritime centre.

The website for the Lower Manhattan Construction Command Center, set up by Governor Pataki and Mayor Bloomberg in November 2004 to co-ordinate all Lower Manhattan development, reported approvingly on local involvement in these and other proposals. In its ‘Looking Ahead’ feature for late 2006, the Lower Manhattan Construction Command Center had this to say:

Since community input was essential in the planning phases for this project, the design team, which also includes New York-based SHoP Architects, the Richard Rogers Partnership from London, and landscape architect Ken Smith, worked in close partnership with the neighboring communities in Lower Manhattan. Building off of community feedback, they returned to each meeting with detailed concept sketches and options for alternative designs. The result was a ‘flexible plan,’ said Greg Pasquarelli of SHoP Architects … ‘This initiative will transform this underutilized area to a year-round recreational oasis for Lower Manhattan families,’ said LMDC President Stefan Pryor. ‘Chain-link fences and concrete barriers will be replaced by cultural facilities, unique recreational spaces, and community amenities.’

And the website for the Downtown Alliance noted top-level commitment to civic improvement. The Downtown Alliance’s Fall 2006 update confirmed that:

Governor Pataki and Mayor Bloomberg allocated $150 million to significantly improve two miles of East River waterfront from the Battery north to East River Park and Pike Street. The plan creates a more pedestrian orientated environment, including a contiguous walking and bike trail, extensive plantings, and an array of spaces for recreation and seating. Further, the plan includes 100,000 square feet of pavilions for culture, recreation, and retail under the FDR; the reuse of the renovated Battery Maritime Building [the terminal for Governors Island ferries]; and a maritime-based facility on the site of the Fulton Fish Market’s New Market Building. Construction is slated to begin on the walkway, waterfront piers and historic slips in early 2008 and is projected to take five years to complete.

Looking at a photograph of Pier 17, taken from Brooklyn Bridge in June 2006, one wonders about the extent to which Governors Island, sleeping in the background, is vulnerable to the commercial forces that rescued the historic seaport, but also condemned it to an all-encompassing heritage-and-retail future. Deviating from that future will be difficult, though the New Esplanade on the East River and the

---

circular waterfront esplanade on Governors Island are at least closer to realisation than they have been for some time.

Governors Island, in background
Pier 17 in foreground, from Brooklyn Bridge
Author’s photograph

10. Battery Park City

The best thing to do with [Governors Island] is to get the deed restrictions lifted and build something similar to Battery Park City—like BPC or not it’s UBER successful. We need the housing. More supply = lower prices. We could build thousands and thousands of 80/20 or even 60/20/20 housing. It could be BPC with enough residents to ensure better retail—it could be awesome!!

This piece of New York City wisdom by ‘duh’, a Curbed reader, pre-dated the 13 November 2006 GIPEC board meeting and the decision to proceed with only one of the component development proposals and none of the all-island proposals. However, Curbed’s correspondent has forgotten the ten years of in-fighting over Battery Park City, preparatory to the new master plan of 1979, authored by Alexander Cooper and Stanton Eckstut. Even so, a selective comparison with Governors Island is worth pursuing to highlight the issues being addressed by GIPEC within the framework of Lower Manhattan and harbour developments.

Removal of the rotting piers on the Hudson River as part of the 1966 Lower Manhattan Plan and then landfill from the World Trade Center had provided

---

the space for development of the World Financial Center, as well as Battery Park City and Esplanade. With an opportunity to develop without pulling down an existing neighbourhood, the Battery Park City Authority was established. Its website gives the organisational history, including its mission, and an insight into the style of the development.50

Christine Boyer includes the example of Battery Park City as part of her trenchant ‘critique of the practices of historic preservation, urban design, and postmodern architecture’ and ‘their unacknowledged complicity with real estate forces and government economic development policies focusing on redeveloping the centers of American and European cities during the 1970s and 1980s.’51 The notion, dating from 1966, that Battery Park City would supply 7500 apartments for low- and middle-income residents gave way, under severe financial pressures, to the logic of the 1979 master plan, that providing housing downtown for those working downtown in the financial sector would keep their business and their tax-dollars in the area as well.52 Government subsidies for low-income families were not accommodated in the budget, because the reduction in full-cost housing would have reduced the overall revenue, understood indirectly as tax dollars and also as a contribution to low-income housing in other areas and to immediate civic amenities. Moreover, a then-emerging anti-modernist aesthetic, evident in Battery Park City, provided few ready alternatives to the high-density and increasingly denigrated low-income housing projects elsewhere in the city.

For Christine Boyer, Battery Park City is an ‘isolated city tableau in the contemporary game of spatial restructuring’. It draws upon tradition in its ‘street furniture’ and upon the concept of a neighbourhood, though the amenities include upmarket restaurants as well as moorings for private yachts.53 However, within the rhetoric of the Battery Park City’s promotional video Battery Park City: Who Knew?, there are signs that public and private positions are not fixed and that they can soften as well as harden. This is one of the lessons that may be learned from a longer, comparative view of developments from The Lower Manhattan Plan to the years following the World Trade Center attacks. Undoubtedly, Battery Park City will remain a middle-class housing development; after all, only that provision would have brought the middle classes back to the downtown area. Yet progress has been made on a financial as well as broader civic front. Battery Park City was sold by New York City to the Battery Park City Authority for a dollar, but it puts $100 million into the City of New York each year, mostly profits from long-term lease rentals. The Solaire at 20 River Terrace, Battery Park City, is a flagship for environmental construction. And, in a crowded environment, 30 per cent of Battery Park City is designated as open space for public use. The Battery Park City Esplanade is also an interesting example.

50 See http://www.batteryparkcity.org.
11. Battery Park City Esplanade

Without the other five neighbourhoods envisaged in the 1966 *Lower Manhattan Plan*, the Esplanade remained linked firmly to Battery Park City throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. The restaurants on, and in the vicinity of, the Esplanade functioned primarily as lunch-time facilities during this period. But with the 9/11 devastation to the east of Battery Park City, bit by bit the Esplanade became more of a walkway link with subsequent Lower Manhattan developments. At lunch-time, after work and at the weekend, the Esplanade gives immediate and public access to the waterfront. The driving force behind such access may originally have been commercial rather than civic but this edge of the city has taken on a very different configuration from the years in which the *Lower Manhattan Plan* was formulated. On the scale of the personal tragedies caused by the 9/11 attacks, the closure of the Esplanade was a minor inconvenience. Yet one interesting consequence of that closure seems to have been a clearer appreciation of the value of its amenities. Usage changes the meaning of space.54

While many of the Esplanade’s amenities are pre-9/11 and linked very much to the corporate motives behind Battery Park City, the area has matured and been supplemented by post-9/11 park developments. The Battery Park City Parks Conservancy (BPC Parks) is an example of an organisation that is a sign of the privatisation of public space, and yet, in its effects, it adds to and manages civic amenities. Community events in the string of parks managed by BPC Parks seek to blend local, communal and tourist orientations, though charges can be high for more

54 See Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*, MIT, Cambridge, Mass., 1960 for one of the first explorations of this insight. Stephen Cairns’ essay in this collection provides an expanded analysis of Lynch’s work.

specialised events. BPC Parks’ self-definition is a sign of the times: a ‘private, non-profit organization, supported mainly by residents of Battery Park City and its commercial and residential developers, as well as by the Battery Park City Authority.\textsuperscript{55}

For those with time and the inclination to walk, the route around the tip of Manhattan is more inviting now, and it will become more so as the Lower Manhattan developments create additional parks and continuous walkways, and as more family-oriented, free amenities are offered to compete with the tourist cruises.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{55} See http://www.bpcparks.org/bpcp/history/history.php.

The Esplanade now runs into Battery Park, and the walker in this part of the city encounters, in succession, the new fountain; the Korea War Memorial, a far more inclusive memorial than the new Second World War memorial on the Mall in Washington; and the Bosque. The last of these—a wooded garden at the southern tip of Battery Park—has received most attention.\(^{57}\) Greater interest in the inhabitants’ wellbeing is mixed with tourist opportunities. Or perhaps it is simply that the development opportunities offered by Battery Park City and the Esplanade are no longer so fiercely debated, as they were from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. In sum, there is a concerted effort to erase the image of the Battery—for example, as it appeared in the movie *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985)—as a strip of land between road and harbour, where lives can be diverted in dangerous ways.

The developments sketched above are slated to satisfy a key component in the 2002 mayoral *Vision*, that is, the development of the East River Esplanade. Governors Island, Brooklyn Bridge Park, East River Park and the renovated strip under FDR Drive at South Street Seaport will complete the necklace of parks and amenities offering access to the waterfront.

### 12. Conclusion: The View from Governors Island

A great deal of Christine Boyer’s critique of postmodern urban development in *The City of Collective Memory* (1994)—the most incisive critique arising out of the mid-1990s—remains vital to an understanding of how ‘the near bankruptcy of the city’s fiscal crisis’ was ‘concealed’ by a lack of critical thinking encouraged by images of tradition, and in which ‘the city and the state … [were] involved in helping financially to underwrite a $4.5 billion, fundamentally upper-class project.’ Yet the strong visual and aesthetic thrust of Boyer’s critique—the ‘crisis of representation’, as she calls it, after Fredric Jameson’s analysis of postmodernism\(^{58}\)—should not override the causes for hope to be found in the latest phases of Battery Park City, but more so in on-going work on the parks and transportation hub at the tip of Manhattan in the wake of 9/11. A mixed private and public combination is incrementally delivering civic amenities that cater to local as well as global needs.\(^{59}\) The question is, How far will incremental gains go? And from a methodological perspective, How are gains to be assessed?

The East River Esplanade needs to be developed, and, with it, some recovery may be expected from the 1980s heritage solution to regeneration that South Street Seaport represents. However, the promised link between multi-million-dollar developments at the tip of Manhattan and the regeneration of deprived, outlying areas remains insecure. This tells us that that while the local inflection towards New Yorkers’ needs is strong in post-9/11 urban rhetoric, the global significance of the re-development of Lower Manhattan and the harbour weighs more heavily on the minds of planning authorities.

---

\(^{57}\) [http://www.lowermanhattan.info/construction/project_updates/battery_bosque_park_reconstruction_15180.aspx#links.](http://www.lowermanhattan.info/construction/project_updates/battery_bosque_park_reconstruction_15180.aspx#links.)

\(^{58}\) Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory*, 464, 467.

And then there is Governors Island. In the afterword to the latest edition of Kevin Bone’s collection, *The New York Waterfront*, Gina Pollara surveys the many schemes that define the changing ethos of New York urbanism, from the pier-by-pier construction of Hudson River Park to the arguments over a new World Trade Center and associated re-planning of the area. Even so, she proposes that the most significant ‘component in the revitalization of the harbor’ is Governors Island.60 In the context of public housing needs and regeneration of failed neighbourhoods, Governors Island does not figure strongly, but it does crystallise interactions between the market and not-for-profit planning, and does so in the full glare of local as well as global media attention. Of the principles laid out by the state and city of New York for the redevelopment of Governors Island, the two that will concentrate GIPEC’s attention most forcefully in the coming year will be: creation of a public place and parklands that all New Yorkers will cherish; and achievement of financial self-sustainability for the island and providing maximum return to GIPEC.

The narrative of Governors Island, calling in its historical resonances, and the sheer amount of visual and textual resources that its redevelopment has made available, undoubtedly frames the question, What interests are mobilised in capitalising visually on a site? But the current situation with Governors Island is not a crisis of representation. And there is not, as yet, a political crisis, though there is a potential loss of political nerve. GIPEC is at the centre of a very complex network of competing demands and motives, the latter not always easy to judge, inasmuch as public benefits can accrue from commercial motives.

Late 2006, with the disappointing response from commercial bidders to develop Governors Island to the standard required by GIPEC, and within the criteria set by the agency, was a low point. There was probably not much choice other than to pursue the ‘park’ dimension of the overall plan, and to hope that the market would see the potential and come back with bids attuned to a strong civic ethos. If it does not then the funding gap will widen. The Governors Island Alliance and the Regional Plan Association that spawned it has been a watchdog on GIPEC, or at least on tendencies to go commercial:

Our concept of redeveloping the Island as a great civic space is the basis for the 2003 transfer from the Federal Government to the Governors Island Preservation and Education Corporation (GIPEC) and the National Park Service (NPS).61

The announcement, on 19 December 2007, following the competition between five firms to design the environment of Governors Island—West 8, Diller Scofidio & Renfro, Rogers Marvel Architects, Quennell Rothschild & Partners, and SMWM—has set a context within which the effort to work with the market will continue. *The New York Times* offers a judicious assessment, in which the leading state and city leaders are quoted as lining up firmly behind the push to get this right. Jerry van Eyck, of West 8, is also quoted to the effect that he and his associates wanted to set parameters of design in order that ‘we don’t end up with Disney or

---


On the 20 December 2007, Rob Pirani, Executive Director of the Regional Plan Association’s Governors Island Alliance, was interviewed on the Brian Lehrer Show. While upbeat that the civic ethos has been established by the West 8 design, his responses indicated the challenges that lie ahead, principally a heavy financial commitment and the need to engage the public over the long period that will be needed for the project to be completed. Unless visitors, and particularly New Yorkers, express their support through continued usage, thereby kick-starting the necessary private investment, there will be a large hole in the public purse and ‘Disney or casinos’ will need to be courted.

David Harvey, whose work has done so much to refine our understanding of postmodern urban space, was scathing in a public lecture about the on-going Lower Manhattan and harbour developments. As an alternative, Harvey recalled the utopian moment of the first few days following the attack on the Twin Towers, when the city pulled together and got its values in order. And yet, it is when one asks, in familiar words, ‘What is to be done?’ that such assertions must strike us as utopian in the weak, even escapist, sense of the word. Of course, against the global power of capital, local parks may mean little. But the struggle to bring parks and other civic amenities into being, including the risky crossing of the boundaries of the public and the private in the service of mixed-use urban developments, indicates that the gaining of space has more to offer than pinning one’s hopes on utopian moments in time. There is, in the context of the years after 9/11, scope for local resistance to a global corporate narrative, and, equally, for intelligent co-operation between commercial and civic needs. However, it is when US capitalism gets back to business, as it did even as the ash was still falling from the sky above Ground Zero and, more recently, after the economic recession, that the arguments over Governors Island can be helpful in telling us where we are now, and what needs to be done.

Governors Island. Courtesy of Tom Clinard
Governors Island History and Tour. Photographs by Christina M. Wilkinson

---

Appendix

GOVERNORS ISLAND TIMELINE

Colonial Era
Pre-Colonial Lenape Indians settle on island they call “Pagganck.”
1524 Giovanni da Verrazzano sights Governors Island.
1609 Henry Hudson explores New York Harbor looking for route to Pacific Ocean.
1624 “Noten Eylant” (Nuten Island) is one of the Dutch West India Company’s first settlements.
1664 British take possession of the island during occupation of New Amsterdam. It remains rural, housing the Governors’ sheep, cattle and coach horses.
1698 British officially acquire the island, hereafter called “Governors Island,” for the “benefit and accommodation of His Majesty’s Governors.”
1702 Edward Hyde, Lord Cornbury, Governor of New York State, builds a splendid” permanent home for the British governors on high ground.
1755 51st Regiment of Foot is the first trained unit of soldiers posted on the island. Later, the unit is joined by the “Royal Americans,” a British regiment recruited in America.
April 1776 Continental troops under George Washington occupy and fortify Governors Island against British invasion.
Sept. 1776 New York City and Governors Island fall to the British.
1783 British Royal Navy surrenders the island to Governor George Clinton of New York State.

The New Republic
1784-1794 Unused military facilities fall into disrepair and the island is leased for a racetrack and summer resort.
1790 Governors Island is granted to the Regents of New York State to raise funds for education. Title is rescinded four years later at the threat of war with France.
1794 Using volunteers from Columbia College, political clubs and trade guilds, Governor Clinton organizes construction of a new fort on the island.
1798 The fort is named after patriot John Jay, the first chief justice of the Supreme Court and a drafter of the peace treaty with England.
1800 New York State cedes the island to the United States.
1806 Reconstruction of Fort Jay.
1811 Castle Williams is completed and named after its designer, Jonathan Williams, the first superintendent of West Point and nephew of Benjamin Franklin.
1815 Peace Treaty with Britain ending the War of 1812 is celebrated with fireworks on Governors Island.
1821 Island becomes headquarters of the Army of the East.
1833 Ordnance Department of the Army selects Governors Island as a major arsenal.
1847 Island’s first church, the Episcopal Chapel of St. Cornelius the Centurion, is consecrated.
1852 Governors Island changes from an artillery post to a recruiting depot.

The Civil War and Beyond
1861-1865 Civil War Governors Island is the central Army recruiting station for the Eastern Seaboard, Castle Williams is a prison camp, sometimes holding over 1,000 Confederate soldiers.
Feb 24, 1865 Confederate Captain John Yates Beall is executed on Governors Island for piracy on Union shipping.

1878 Island changes from Army fortification to administrative center.
1901-12 4,787,000 cubic yards of fill from the Lexington Avenue Subway enlarged Governors Island from 70 to 172 acres at a cost of $1.1 million. Secretary of the Army Elihu Root selects architects McKim, Mead & White to design a new headquarters for the Department of the East.

Sept 29, 1909 Wilbur Wright takes off from Governors Island on the first flight ever over American waters, circling the Statue of Liberty before returning. A few days later he flies from the island to Grant’s Tomb and back.

World Wars I and II
1914-1918 World War I Island is a major supply base and embarkation point. More than 70 new buildings are erected.
1918 “World’s shortest railroad” (a locomotive and three flat cars on one mile of track) carries coal, machinery and supplies from the pier to shops and warehouses.
1924 A municipal airport is proposed for Governors Island.
1924 Liggett Hall opens, designed by McKim, Mead & White, it is the first Army structure to house all facilities for an entire regiment.
1939-1945 World War II Island is a major administration center and chief reception center for inductees.
1942 WAC detachment brings the island its first women soldiers.

Recent History
1966 U.S. Army leaves Governors Island.
Jun 30, 1966 Rear Admiral I.J. Stephens accepts jurisdiction over Governors Island on behalf of the U.S. Coast Guard.
1986 President Ronald Reagan relights the torch of the restored Statue of Liberty from the southwestern tip of the island.
Dec 7, 1988 Diplomatic meetings between Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev held at the Admiral’s House.
1996 Coast Guard leaves Governors Island.
Jan 19, 2001 President William J. Clinton establishes the Governors Island National Monument.
April 1, 2002 President George W. Bush, Governor George Pataki and Mayor Michael Bloomberg announce that the Federal government will sell the island back to the people of New York for one dollar.
Jan 31, 2003 After 200 years, Governors Island is transferred back to the people of New York City and State through the Governors Island Preservation and Education Program (GIPEC).

Governors Island Timeline. Courtesy of GIPEC.