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River of Hope in the Bronx

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PERHAPS the most unsung patch of heaven in New York City is a tiny sliver of riverfront parkland tucked between a metal-recycling yard and a giant wholesale produce market, on the far side of a six-lane highway and a pair of active freight train tracks. Hunts Point Riverside Park, a 1.4-acre speck in the South Bronx, opened a few years ago on what had been a filthy, weedy street end.

A garden path now winds from the front gate past rose bushes and flowering butterfly bushes, beyond a sprinkling fountain and shaded benches under a flowered trellis, to a pier on the Bronx River. Save for a couple of brick apartment towers rising over the treetops, the view is green across the river. Herons and egrets silently roam the riverbank. The other afternoon teenagers from Rocking the Boat, a neighborhood organization that teaches boatbuilding, sailing and environmental restoration, were lugging rowboats to the muddy shore and launching themselves into the river. Jason Feldman, in tie and shirt sleeves, having trekked from his office at a heat exchange plant up the block, was on his way out of the park, after eating lunch at one of the wooden picnic tables.

“I come here all the time,” he said. “It’s incredible, no?”

Yes, it is.

For years one of the most blighted, abused waterways in the country, the southern end of the Bronx River has been slowly coming back and with it the shoreline that meanders through the South Bronx. Next year, barring further delays, what looks to be an innovative work of green architecture, by the Brooklyn firm Kiss & Cathcart, is slated to open in Starlight Park, a green stretch upriver from Hunts Point Riverside. This summer at the mouth of the river another street-end pocket park, Hunts Point Landing, is opening between a Sanitation Department depot and a food processing plant.

The New York waterfront is changing perhaps more than any other part of the city. For centuries the interests of big money and industry shaped it. These days, notwithstanding dogged efforts by the Economic Development Corporation to kindle business along the waterfronts of Sunset Park in Brooklyn and on Staten Island, the city’s old industrial

waterfront is in many places giving way to parks and luxury apartment towers where money still talks, like along the Hudson.

But compared with headline-making projects in Manhattan and Brooklyn, the unexpected renaissance under way along the south end of the Bronx River flies largely below the radar. Park by park a patchwork of green spaces has been taking shape, the consequence of decades of grinding, grass-roots, community-driven efforts. For the environmentalists, educators, politicians, architects and landscape designers involved, the idea has not just been to revitalize a befouled waterway and create new public spaces. It has been to invest Bronx residents, for generations alienated from the water, in the beauty and upkeep of their local river.

The transformation has involved an alphabet soup of public entities and local organizations like Rocking the Boat, Sustainable South Bronx, Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice, Partnership for Parks and the Bronx River Alliance. The Bloomberg administration has made the project a special priority. The South Bronx illustrates how government, although it can be obstructionist and infuriating, is also indispensable to urban improvement. Different federal administrations have mandated cooperation by often competing agencies. Dozens of community groups have subordinated their own pet interests to cleaning the river and creating parks.

The results aren't complete or perfect, far from it. The new parks are still piecemeal and disconnected, plagued by good intentions, half-measures and bureaucratic foul-ups. Boat launches don't work; green spaces aren't always kept clean; sites are created without adequate programming. Progress is painfully slow.

Still, what's happened, under the circumstances, is hardly short of miraculous.

The long-term goal? The recovery of a great waterway and its neighborhoods. More specifically, a greenbelt along the Bronx River as it winds south from the Bronx Zoo, under the bright blue Westchester Avenue bridge, beneath the clamorous Bruckner Expressway, past scrap-metal yards and recycling plants, warehouses and sewage overflow drains.

Industry isn't going away, and it can't if New York's economy is to thrive. But the city needs industry to coexist with a healthy citizenry, and the South Bronx, with a population as large as Boston's, belongs to the poorest congressional district in the nation, suffering from high asthma and obesity rates and a lack of recreation space.

Hunts Point, where the river widens and spills into the confluence of the Long Island Sound and the East River, remains a gritty industrial peninsula, home to several thousand people,

and to the vast wholesale food market. A prison barge hugs the shore. From [Barretto Point Park](#), one of the most ambitious of the recent parks — with the famous floating pool designed by the architect Jonathan Kirschenfeld as well as a beach and playgrounds on a former brownfield beside a sewage treatment plant — there's a sweeping panorama of the Rikers Island prison complex.

And yet.

The clash of industry and nature is also one of those peculiarly urban, weirdly beautiful, hypnotic vistas, and it makes the passage upriver more magical, as the factories and concertina wire give way to weedy bluffs.

Centuries ago the Mohicans called the river “Aquehung,” the River of High Bluffs, a refuge that lured poets from Manhattan. Then the snuff factories and paper mills arrived, followed by the New York Central Railroad. By the turn of the last century the Bronx River had already become an open sewer, prompting renewal efforts that galvanized around a parkway to cordon off the northern end of the watershed between Westchester and the Bronx Zoo.

I hopped a No. 5 train recently with Morgan Powell, a local historian and landscape designer, to check out a little of that northern stretch of the river in the Bronx, and we visited Rosewood Playground, a W.P.A. site refurbished about a decade ago and also the attractive new entrance to Shoelace Park, designed by Donna Walcavage, with its redbud trees, switch grasses and other native plantings. From a dock nearby, the water ran clear over a pebble bed, barely deep enough to float a paper boat.

The river's southern end had to wait until the 1970s, when the Bronx was burning, before anybody started talking seriously about ecological restoration and green space. A local police commander, Anthony Bouza, joined forces with a secretary at Fordham University, Ruth Anderberg, to make restoration a cause. The commander lived in Westchester and was struck while commuting each day by how the river was “a bucolic, sylvan, beautiful place” up north, he once recalled, but “in the South Bronx it was a yellow sewer” and “a symptom of America's attitudes toward the underclass, a powerful, physical metaphor.” Anderberg agreed, quit her job and started the Bronx River Restoration Project.

By 1980 the project had published the area's first greenway plan, which in many respects mapped what, all these years later, is slowly coming to pass. By the late '80s proposals circulated for bike paths. José E. Serrano, a state assemblyman who became the district's congressman in 1990, took up the recuperation of the river as a crusade. So did the city parks commissioner Henry J. Stern, and his successor, Adrian Benepe. The Bronx River

Restoration Project gave way to the Bronx River Working Group, which became the [Bronx River Alliance](#).

The ecological movement, urban restoration in Europe and a new generation of bike-riding urbanists moved the issue into the mainstream. As Dart Westphal, former chairman of the Bronx River Alliance, put it the other day: “Over time all the talk about bikes and parks and improving the urban environment gradually became more than talk. It became cool.”

Mr. Benepe estimated when we toured the area recently that some \$100 million of the roughly \$700 million spent on Bronx parks by the city under the Bloomberg administration had gone to the river and new riverside parks, although the city comptroller’s office is investigating whether Bronx parks also received the \$200 million promised years ago by the city’s Environmental Protection Department in return for a much-criticized, mind-bogglingly-costly water filtration plant being built in Van Cortlandt Park. Meanwhile money has come in from Yonkers, White Plains, Scarsdale and Greenburgh in legal settlements for polluting the river, and state money has poured into projects like Starlight Park.

All that said, the pint-size Hunts Point Riverside Park cost just \$3.3 million; Barretto Point Park, with its floating pool, its pier and beach, fields and playgrounds, cost \$7 million; [Concrete Plant Park](#), where I saw lovers necking and old men fishing in the river, cost \$11.4 million, most of which went to removing 32,000 tons of contaminated soil.

Big improvements don’t all carry scary price tags.

Concrete Plant Park, designed by Jim Mituzas, a veteran landscape architect with the Parks Department, occupies a narrow 1,900-foot length of riverfront hemmed in by the Bruckner Boulevard, Westchester Avenue and a fence separating the park from Amtrak rails: the Acela thunders by every hour or so. From the din of 12-lane traffic the entrance to the park off the Bruckner opens suddenly onto a hillside of native plantings capering down to the river. Mr. Mituzas salvaged remnants of the defunct concrete plant to make the ruin a kind of sculptural centerpiece. The park opened in 2009. The budget was tight, and the place lacks enough trees for shade and to block off the train tracks, but it’s a respite for residents, picnickers and fishermen, a link in the emerging chain of green spaces between Hunts Point Riverside and the prospective Starlight Park.

Starlight, which still needs to overcome frustrating delays in negotiations between Amtrak and the state Transportation Department over constructing a pedestrian bridge near the tracks, promises to be much used, with soccer and softball fields, playgrounds and a new headquarters for the Bronx River Alliance in the Kiss & Cathcart building. The site was one of the most contaminated in New York, because of a former coal gasification plant. Con Ed

paid for cleanup, and the big pity is that the city last month declined to tear down the Sheridan Expressway, which severs the park from its neighborhood.

But the 7,000-square-foot, one-story [Bronx River House](#) that Gregory Kiss of Kiss & Cathcart has envisioned to anchor a corner of the park looks auspicious. The building is a simple rectangular masonry block, the architecture coming from the slanting metal mesh fences enclosing the structure and curved along the front to form an entry plaza, linked to a future footbridge over the river. Planted with hardy vines that change colors with the season, the fences will act like a curtain wall, slightly separated from and cladding the building, creating a narrow gap where a microclimate of ferns, mosses and collected rainwater can evolve.

The idea is that the River House should create its own climate zone, have its own smell, be its own natural habitat. Solar panels will generate most of the energy for the building. “‘Green’ and ‘sustainable’ are words that have lost their meaning these days,” Mr. Kiss told me the other day. “This project is meant to be what people mean when they say ‘utopian.’” We’ll see. In any event Bronx River House introduces a level of architectural ambition that’s new to this end of the South Bronx.

I boarded a boat with Adam Green, the founder of Rocking the Boat, headquartered just next to [Hunts Point Riverside Park](#). We motored to Starlight Park, where the river becomes almost wild. Weeping willows hung over the water. Fish darted under the water. An old tire swing dangled from the limb of a tree. Intrepid teenagers clearly used the river here, and anglers fished all along it even when the river was a toxic garbage dump.

Likewise, for years before it became a park Barretto Point was called La Playita by the men who cast nets for crabs from its shore and by local residents who flocked to the tropical trios that were part of the raucous party scene that overtook the surrounding streets each summer. The new parks and waterfront in the South Bronx, in other words, have not so much been imposed on its neighborhoods as they have given architectural permanence and dignity to what the residents already tried to cook up for themselves.

The latest park, Hunts Point Landing, is yet another spot where fishermen for ages cast lines. It used to be the dead end of Farragut Street. The city demapped the street. Signe Nielsen, a landscape architect, designed the site, which occupies barely 100 feet of waterfront. She installed wetlands, bio-filtration pools and reef balls at the water’s edge for oysters and mussels to spawn, and a new pier.

It’s another of the eye-popping changes: a tiny green oasis next to a salt shed in the shadow of the crumbling ruins of a former waste transfer station. How many people will trek to

Hunts Point Landing, considering the lack of public transit and programming, remains to be seen. What's certain, though, is that it's another piece of the puzzle. Future administrations will need to follow through on the South Bronx Greenway plans, continuing the network of green streets like Hunts Point and Lafayette Avenues that Ms. Nielsen has devised — linking up with Randalls Island and eking out parkland where the food market now hogs the shoreline — if the puzzle is ever to be completed.

It was symbolic last month that Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg chose Soundview Park, across from Hunts Point Landing at the mouth of the Bronx River, to celebrate Mr. Benepe, who's leaving as commissioner to join the Trust for Public Land. City officials used the occasion to break ground on more than \$15 million in improvements to that park.

What's emerging in the Bronx is past and future. A new, more equitable vision for the city in the 21st century. And a river returned, at least partly, to its former glory.