landscape architecture

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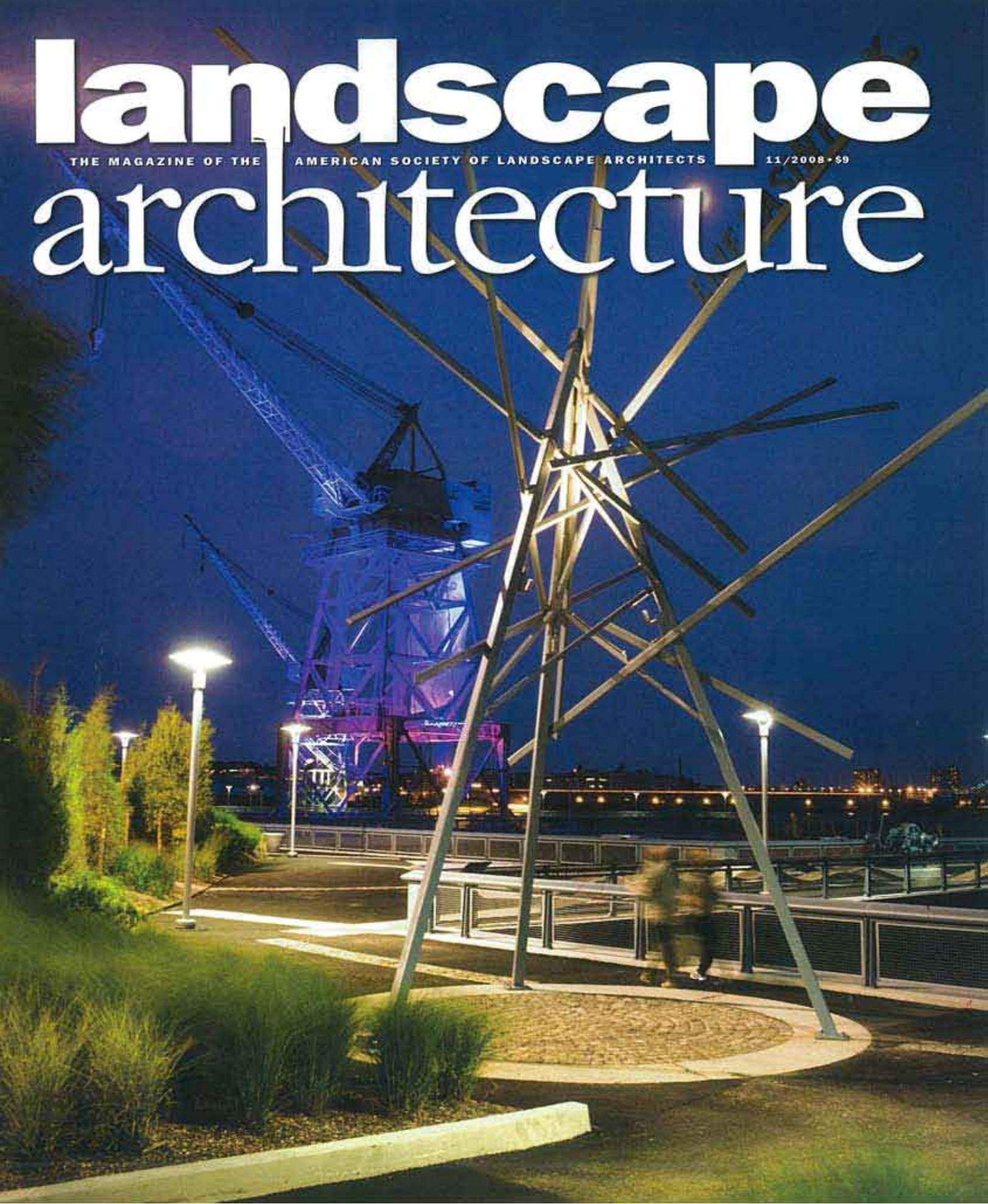
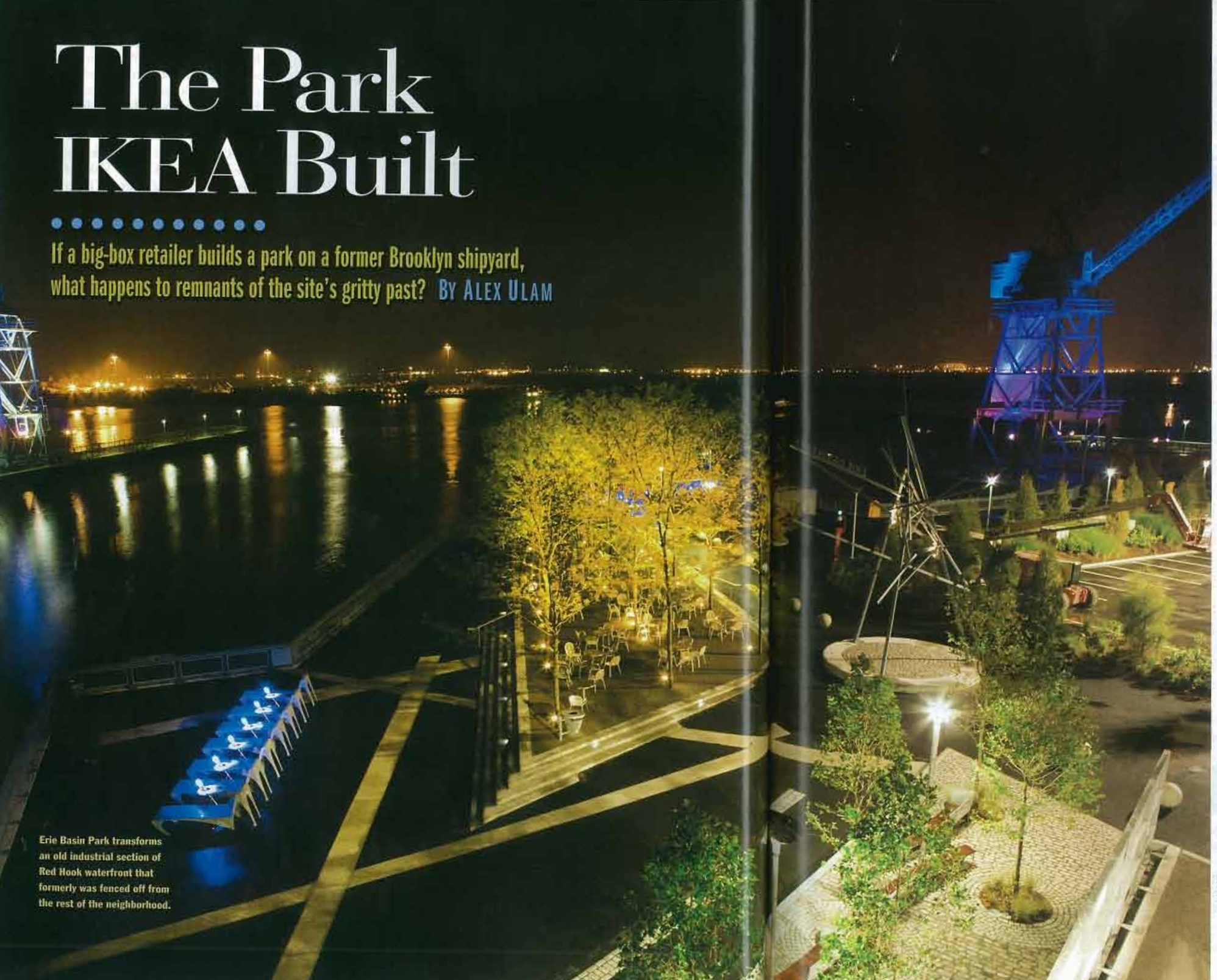


The Park IKEA Built

If a big-box retailer builds a park on a former Brooklyn shipyard, what happens to remnants of the site's gritty past? BY ALEX ULAM



Erie Basin Park transforms an old industrial section of Red Hook waterfront that formerly was fenced off from the rest of the neighborhood.

ERIN COORE

ONE OF THE MOST EXCITING things about visiting Erie Basin Park, which opened in June in the formerly isolated Brooklyn neighborhood of Red Hook, is getting there. And these days, the easiest way to get to Red Hook from Manhattan is by means of a new water taxi service. During the daytime and evening hours, every 40 minutes one of the yellow ferries leaves from near Wall Street and zips across New York's harbor for an approximately 15-minute trip past the city's other new waterfront parks—Governors Island and Brooklyn Bridge Park—and into the Red Hook inlet, where it docks at a pier right in the middle of Erie Basin Park. Here, in back of a tree-lined esplanade, looms the giant blue IKEA store, which has opened Red Hook to the rest of the city by paying for the free ferry service, a free bus service—and the new park.

Big-box stores and waterfront parks are new to gritty Red Hook. For much of its history, shipping-related industries almost completely walled off the neighborhood from its waterfront. And, with no subway service and one of the largest concentrations of public housing projects in the city, Red Hook was not the type of place that attracted national retailers. Most of the neighborhood still looks as though it is a sleepy urban backwater from another time. Artists and craftspeople have begun to colonize the large red brick warehouses and small town houses that line the cobblestone streets along the waterfront, and trendy bars and restaurants have sprung up in renovated storefronts. Despite the newcomers, though, stretches of Red Hook's waterfront are still occupied by shipping-related industries, and there was little new development—until IKEA decided to locate here.

IKEA needed to obtain major zoning changes from the city planning department to build a store at the former industrial site. As is the case with other former waterfront industrial sites facing redevelopment, city planning officials made the zoning changes contingent upon IKEA providing waterfront access and also building and maintaining a public esplanade.

Encompassing six and a half acres and a mile of waterfront, the resulting Erie Basin Park is one of the most significant privately owned public spaces in New York City. It represents yet another model of the many different kinds of public–private partnerships that are transforming waterfront land once predominantly used for industrial purposes into a network of new urban parks. And at a time when many urban parks are being developed in former industrial areas and landscape designers are increasingly attempting to address the

From this aerial, *above*, it appears as though IKEA and its massive parking lot overwhelm the site, but inside the park the landscape does a good job of shielding the visitor from the impact of the big-box store. When the site was a functioning shipyard, *right*, ships would berth in the graving dock.

history of places in their designs, Erie Basin Park also stands out for its strong connection to the site's history as the Todd Shipyards, a place that for more than a century served as one of New York Harbor's main ship repair facilities.

In keeping with the neighborhood's mixed-use character, at Erie Basin Park the boundaries between urban parkland and working waterfront are somewhat blurred, which is exactly the effect Lee Weintraub, FASLA, was striving for when he designed it. Take a walk out onto the open expanse of 775-foot-long Pier 4 and it's easy to imagine the place as a functioning shipyard. Underfoot, the concrete is stained with various colors of paint and industrial substances. Large round yellow cleats used for tying up ships and barges are located on the edges of the three piers. Overhead loom the operator's cabins, ladders, and the massive supports of recently decommissioned freight cranes, several as high as seven stories. You can even hear a cacophony of mechanical whines and whirrs coming from the Hughes Shipyard across the small inlet from the park, a place that is still alive with tugboat and barge traffic.

"What we are trying to convey somehow," says Weintraub, "is a feeling that something happened here before America was transformed from a place where we actually made things to a place where we now import them."

COURTESY MUNICIPAL ART SOCIETY OF NEW YORK

IN 2002 IKEA MANAGEMENT needed an esplanade design in a hurry to get the zoning changes that would enable them to move forward on their controversial plans. So IKEA officials called Weintraub's three-person office and asked: Could he design a park in six weeks?

Producing a design for such a large project on such a tight deadline was only part of the challenge. Weintraub also had to educate the company about what was involved in building and operating a park. "The client's first priority was not the park but the design and development of a retail structure," he says. "There were certain opportunities and constraints that were imposed—obviously one was the unspoken constraint that we weren't going to be able to build it with the kinds of materials we would have been able to build it with if the client were park oriented."

"What we are trying to convey is that something happened here before America was transformed from a place where we actually made things to a place where we now import them."

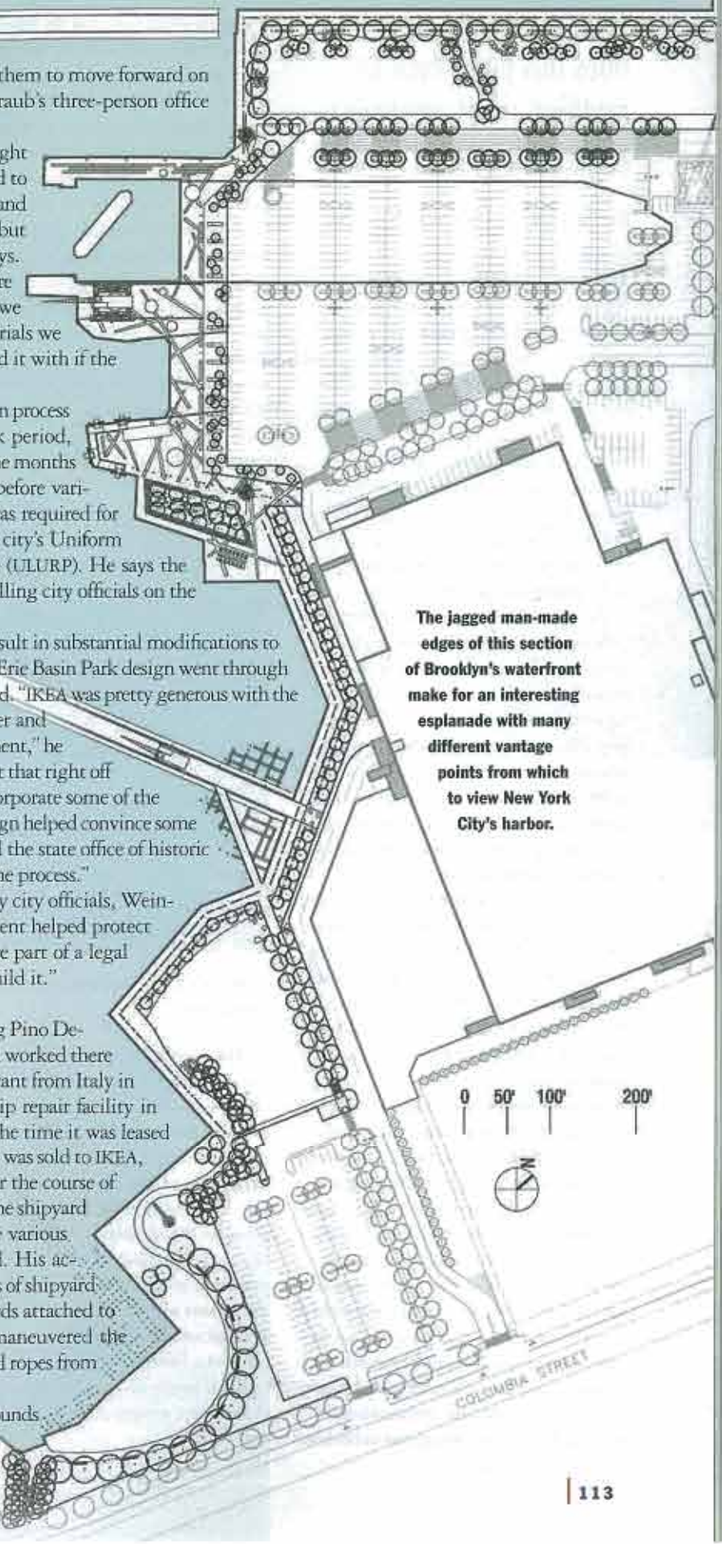
After completing the design process within the allotted six-week period, Weintraub spent the next nine months presenting the park design before various agencies and boards as was required for the site's rezoning under the city's Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP). He says the park project was critical to selling city officials on the entire IKEA project.

While ULURP can often result in substantial modifications to a project, Weintraub says the Erie Basin Park design went through the process relatively unscathed. "IKEA was pretty generous with the amount of space that was over and above the regulatory requirement," he explains. "In addition, the fact that right off the bat we were going to incorporate some of the shipyard artifacts into the design helped convince some of the regulatory folks—the city planning commission and the state office of historic preservation—who otherwise might have been thorns in the process."

After the design was thoroughly vetted and approved by city officials, Weintraub says the fact that the park was now a legal requirement helped protect it against modifications by the client. "Our drawings were part of a legal document," he says, "and the obligation of IKEA was to build it."

WEINTRAUB FORGED A LINK to the past by consulting Pino Deserio, the former foreman of the shipyard. Deserio had worked there since arriving in this country as a 17-year-old immigrant from Italy in 1970. He was at the shipyard when it was closed as a ship repair facility in 1992, and he continued working there afterward during the time it was leased out for docking and storage. In 2005, when the 22-acre site was sold to IKEA, Deserio was hired as a facilities manager for the store. Over the course of many conversations, Deserio described to Weintraub how the shipyard functioned, what it was like working there, and how the various pieces of equipment left lying around the site were used. His accounts of the place along with photographs of various pieces of shipyard equipment in use are displayed on gray information placards attached to the railings that run along the esplanade. Deserio also maneuvered the cranes into place and helped to find the old tools, cleats, and ropes from the shipyard that are now on display in the park.

When Weintraub speaks about the history of the site he sounds like an urban archaeologist as much as a landscape architect.



The jagged man-made edges of this section of Brooklyn's waterfront make for an interesting esplanade with many different vantage points from which to view New York City's harbor.

COURTESY LEE WEINTRAUB LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

PERSPECTIVE

Does this park teach us anything about preserving old industrial sites?

BY FRANK EDGERTON MARTIN

RECENTLY, I took a water taxi to Red Hook to visit New York's new IKEA. As we approached the glowing store in the twilight, I realized that Red Hook's harbor front is surely one of the most beautiful urban landscapes in New York. It is also a controversial development zone that, more than any other I've seen, expresses the puzzles that landscape architects face in design for historic sites. What is the balance between "sensitive" new design and authenticity? How can we preserve the stories of an earlier industrial era while meeting new needs?

The real question for me is not whether to build an IKEA store (one that will provide much-needed jobs for residents of nearby housing projects); nor is it the projected car traffic that some locals equated with Armageddon. The problem is: Why did the developers have to put the big blue box in the middle of one of our nation's greatest 19th-century marine warehouse complexes? Why, just in the moment when New Yorkers are beginning to rediscover their rich waterfront history (especially evident in Brooklyn from Greenpoint to Red Hook), are they chipping away at its spatial structure? Indeed, at one time, Brooklyn had so many waterfront warehouses that it was known as "the walled city." Thus, preserving this continuity of buildings is important in telling the story of a once-great economic power.

There's a great deal of empty open space just across Beard Street where the big blue box could have gone. Still, I can't deny that, especially in misty twilight, the inviting new park and its four soaring gantry cranes, colorfully (though nonhistorically) lighted, reach out to the sky and the twinkling harbor. You can smell, feel, and hear the ocean breezes and even sense that you stand at the sheltered edge of a continent. Aren't these sensory impressions also part of historic character?

Where once a working dry dock occupied the Todd Shipyards, now "interpretations" of its past include spray-painted collections of ship-repairing tools and the inscribed names of ships that once docked there. A gritty, authentic working history that few people ever saw has been replaced with a tasteful thematic landscape architecture that many people will see. Like me, they will learn a bit of New York's history as a major Civil War-era conduit for the Great Lakes. But Red Hook will never be the same. There is little consensus among preservationists about how to treat such urban historic landscapes. Many cities and state historic preservation offices would have forbidden this introduction of plantings, lighting, and street furniture in a historic industrial area. Mill Ruins Park, in my own city of Minneapolis, is one example where only very minimal elements could be added.

Prior to the park being built, the docks had deteriorated.

Still, I'm not sure that Red Hook's honestly contemporary landscape architecture is such a bad thing—or that the neighborhood will become "Mayberry with a big blue box," as one local wag put it. Red Hook will gentrify, as will most of New York eventually. And, it can continue to include places of both consumption and production, but the jobs will be new ones, most likely in New York's booming media and service industries. Red Hook's warehouses were an early expression of globalization and trade in the 19th century. The fact that a Swedish store is now there selling products largely made in Asia is, whether we like it or not, equally expressive of who we are today.

"We got there much too late," he says. "The shipyard had been abandoned for some time, so we took a shipping container and we tried to salvage stuff—we went into old buildings and we looked under tables and in closets. We came up with whatever looked like it was interesting, and so we have a tool garden, we have a cleat garden, a rope garden with giant coils of rope and winches—this is all part of the story that we are trying to tell."

In places, the remnants of the shipyard that Weintraub has inserted into the landscape evoke feelings of melancholy and nostalgia. To accommodate the park and the adjacent parking lot, IKEA filled in a 710-foot-long ship repair facility known as a graving dock, which was built in 1860. Although by the time IKEA bought the site, the graving dock had been out of use for more than a decade, its destruction was quite controversial both because of its historical significance and also because it was one of only two such facilities in the city where large ships could be repaired. It was listed on the Preservation League of New York's "Seven to Save" landmarks. There were also several unsuccessful lawsuits that sought to preserve the graving dock and other historic structures at the site including one lawsuit by the influential Municipal Art Society against the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, arguing that the historic resources merited National Landmark status.

Weintraub's design goes to great lengths to commemorate the graving dock. Massive concrete blocks called chalks, which were once used for stabilizing ships undergoing repairs in the dock, have been recycled for use in an embankment that shields the park from the IKEA parking lot. Stacked in rows, the chalks look like giant tombstones, and in a way they are. Inscribed upon them in metallic lettering are the names of the ships that once used the yard, and Weintraub embedded cobblestones in the asphalt to demarcate a ghostly outline of where the buried graving dock is located.

COURTESY LEE WEINTRAUB LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

IKEA officials gave Weintraub great leeway in designing the park, but he says it was a challenge to get the company to pay for everything that he wanted to build. "Every budget decision was a battle and a crisis," he says. IKEA did not give Weintraub a budget for designing the park, and IKEA officials still refuse to say how much they spent on it.

Some cost savings were achieved by adhering to the environmental impact statement requirement that historic elements from the site be reused in the park's design. Although he found the budget constraints frustrating at times, Weintraub treated them more as a creative challenge than as a drawback. "Throwing money at solutions does not make things better," he says.

The budget constraints are evident in the esplanade, much of which is composed of asphalt as opposed to the pavers common in many of the city's other new waterfront parks. But in most cases the value engineering in Erie Basin Park actually enhances the design rather than detracting from it. For example, the cobblestones recycled from the site help bring alive the historic qualities that Weintraub sought to incorporate, as does Pier 4, the longest pier in the center of the park that was left mostly in the same condition in which it was found. In addition, the lack of funds resulted in a dilapidated section of another pier

COLIN COOKE

Many of the custom-designed chairs and benches, *above*, are not scaled to the human form, but they contribute to the sense of fantasy that pervades the park and also provide different seating possibilities. Lee Weintraub, FASLA, raised sections of the park above grade, as with this intimate seating area perched atop a hillock, *right*, to capitalize on views of the harbor.

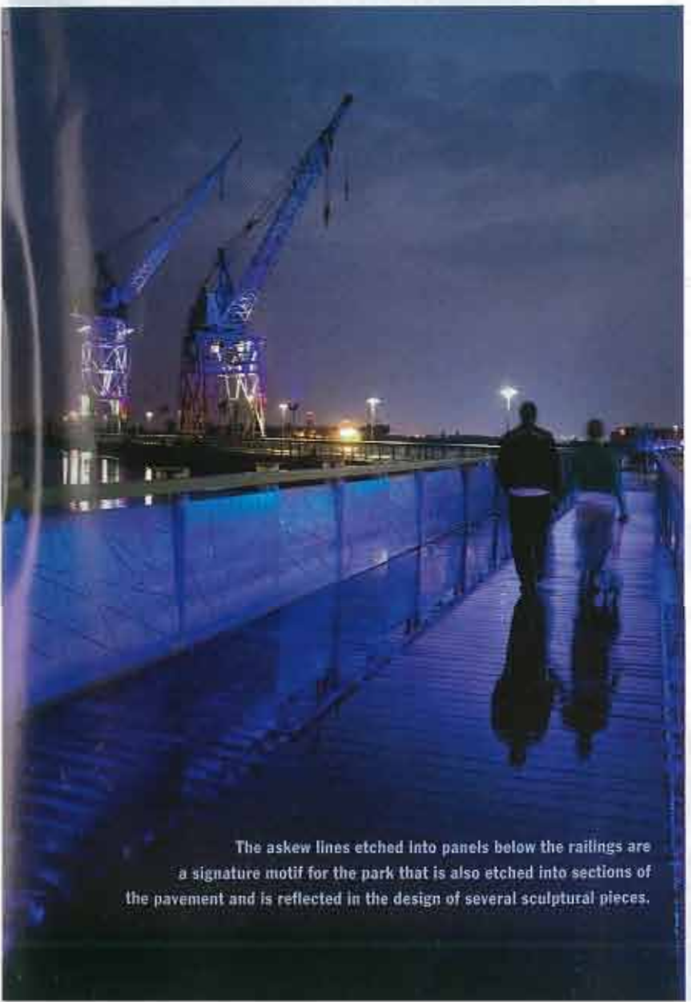
The emphasis on industrial materials and the recurring motif of askew lines ties the distinctive environments together.

being left unrehabilitated and barricaded off from the park completely. The rotting beams of this pier still play a part in enhancing the nostalgic aspect of the park's design.

In addition to its historic elements, the park features custom-made furniture and fixtures, all designed by Weintraub. The wide assortment includes oversized metal mesh chaise longues, large timbered wood benches, and asymmetrically shaped wood benches with distinctive metal mesh backs. Other furniture, such as the wave-shaped benches located on one of the piers, is so abstract that it is not immediately clear that it is intended for seating. Although reclining is the intended use for the wave-shaped benches, they are mostly used by Red Hook youths for stunts on BMX bicycles.

Weintraub contoured the park in such a way that the visitor is provided with a wide range of views and pedestrian corridors. The site itself already offered an interesting rebuilt man-made edge that angles in and out along the Red Hook inlet and provides stunning views of New York City's harbor. But Weintraub built upon this atypical waterfront edge to create a richly planted landscape where there is a surprise at every turn in the esplanade. For example, walking along the esplanade toward the Columbia Street exit, visitors discover lawn spaces in varying shapes as well as different types of plantings. Continue walking, and around another turn, off in the distance next to a strand of white birches, you catch a glimpse of a riot of rods and supports protruding in different directions from an indoor–outdoor structure, which upon closer inspection turns out to be a way station with benches.

Although the park has a wide variety of landscapes and distinctive places, the emphasis on industrial materials and the recurring motif of askew lines ties the distinctive environments together. The askew line motif, which Weintraub says is intended to reflect the patterns cast by light shining through a ship's rigging, is found throughout the park in large sculptures set upon concrete platforms in the esplanade that are located at key view corridors, etched into the paving underfoot along the esplanade at the center of the park, and in the metal panels attached to the railings.



The askew lines etched into panels below the railings are a signature motif for the park that is also etched into sections of the pavement and is reflected in the design of several sculptural pieces.

COLIN COOKE

WHILE THERE WAS STRONG OPPOSITION to the conversion of the shipyard into a retail site and a park, many residents welcome the IKEA development as a historic opportunity for residents of Red Hook to discover their waterfront. "I think that the park is amazing," says Jerry Armer, the former head of Brooklyn Community Board 6, a local representative body that serves as an advocate for neighborhood residents. "It gives people access to a part of the waterfront that for about 100 years was a shipyard and not accessible to the general population."

This park belongs to IKEA, not New York City—so how does the city view it?

Amanda Burden, chair of the New York City Planning Department, acknowledges that IKEA and Weintraub went far beyond what was required. "They didn't have to do 90 percent of what they did," says Burden, adding that her office is using Erie Basin Park as the inspiration for revisions to the city's regulations for waterfront parks. "This is a situation where you had a client, IKEA, that really wanted to make a difference and leave a lasting legacy in the neighborhood they were moving into, and we had a landscape architect who really put his heart and soul into keeping after the essence of what he wanted to achieve."

Still, how well does Erie Basin work for New Yorkers? Does it fulfill what Joseph Roth, IKEA public affairs director, says IKEA wanted—"something that would actually be inviting and user friendly, not something that would be too pristine where people would feel unwelcome"?

One of the most striking aspects of this privately owned park is how the design conceals views of the IKEA store while revealing so much of the waterfront and its history. The only sign within the park advertising IKEA is a large banner draped across one of the cranes, but otherwise there is little indication that the park is privately owned and maintained. There are clear view corridors to the surrounding neighborhood and the waterfront, but the landscape shields the park visitor to a certain extent from the enormous 346,000-square-foot IKEA store and its large parking lots, which at full capacity can hold 1,400 cars. In many places, hillocks with rows of trees block views of the parking lots and lessen the impact of the store's looming facade. Along one section of the esplanade, where only a 40-foot-wide distance separates the store and the waterfront, Weintraub erected a brightly colored metallic wall of corrugated steel with orange, red, green, and clear panels to screen the parking lot underneath the store.

In addition, the park visitor is easily able to completely bypass the store—only one meandering path leads from the ferry landing through the park to the store, whereas four separate paths connect the park directly to the surrounding streets. The public aspect of the park, which is officially open from dawn until dusk, is further enhanced by the fact that there are no gates or fences around it. Security is maintained by surveillance cameras throughout the park, the presence of a New York City police officer who is stationed near the ferry, and several security guards with radios who sit near the entrances.

Weintraub situated traditional New York City Parks Department World's Fair benches near the park's main entryways to signal to visitors that although privately owned and maintained, it is a public park. Further into the park, the traditional looking park furniture gives way to the more imaginative pieces, which are crafted in industrial materials that pay tribute to the site's heritage as a shipyard. Some of the chairs and benches are also arranged so that they look as much like sculpture as like seating. Two of the oversize chaise longues set adjacent to steel tables with attached cylindrical blue light fixtures are secluded at a romantic spot on the top of a small grass-covered slope that accords spectacular views of New York City's harbor. Toward the center of the esplanade where the pedestrian corridors converge, a series of asymmetrically shaped metal-backed wood benches are set in an arrangement that Burden of City Planning refers to as "social seating." Weintraub has arranged the curved metal mesh-backed benches about a foot apart and at oblique angles to better enable persons sitting on different benches to talk to one another.

It's clear that Weintraub felt he was working as much for the people of New York as he was for IKEA, although the retailer was footing the bill for the park. "IKEA got the opportunity to locate its store in this portion of Brooklyn, and what they were mandated to do by the City Planning Commission was to build a park," he says, but adds that "it was part of a spiritual and moral obligation to do something that was a bit more than just conforming to regulations."

Alex Ulam is a freelance journalist who writes frequently on architecture and design for publications such as The Architect's Newspaper *and* Architectural Record.

PROJECT CREDITS **Landscape architects:** Lee Weintraub Landscape Architecture LLC, New York (Lee Weintraub, FASLA; Anderson DeMoraes; Gonzalo Cruz; Gio Diaz; Steven Tupu, ASLA). **Structural engineers:** Weidlinger Associates International, New York. **Lighting design:** Fisher Marantz Stone, New York. **Graphic design:** Russell Design Associates, New York. **Waterfront engineering:** Vollmuth and Brush, Blue Point, New York.

These asymmetrically shaped benches are set at oblique angles to better enable persons sitting on them to talk to one another.

COLIN COOKE