



A view of the finished portion of the new East River Park just south of the Williamsburg Bridge (Hell Gate)

CORRECT OPINIONS

After All That, the New East River Park Is...Fucking Awesome

We'll have to see whether the new resiliency infrastructure will withstand another superstorm, but we're happy to report that the park itself is, so far, a smashing success.



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As a person of Lower East Side residency who looks out my window onto the East River, I've spent the last few years thinking about John V. Lindsay East River Park almost constantly.

As the park nears the finish line of a five-year-long, \$1.45 billion climate resiliency makeover designed to protect the coastline from the effects of future flood surges like Superstorm Sandy, I have gazed forlornly upon a giant Sisyphean pile of dirt that, for months, seemed like it was just being moved around from location to location. I have thought about the construction workers, who looked tiny from my vantage, and wondered how far they had to walk to go to the bathroom. I have grumbled at the mini-nursery of trees sitting in a concrete parking area on FDR Drive as they waited to be planted for what seemed like weeks, wondering how they were going to survive the combination of car exhaust and late winter air. I pondered the massive, boxy new floodgates, which are meant to protect the city against invading storm waters like a castle portcullis. One night in June of last year, I stayed up until 3 a.m. like it was Christmas Eve, so I could watch the Delancey Street Pedestrian Bridge being installed. They shut down the FDR and rolled in the \$32 million structure on massive flatbed trucks before lifting it into place with the biggest crane I have ever seen. The bridge took several months to finally open up to humans (though I'm still waiting for them to finish the staircase that would provide a shortcut for those trying to access the bridge from FDR Drive), a stretch of time during which I looked longingly at its shiny Italian steel arches and wide, welcoming berth.

The park's renewal—also known as the [East Side Coastal Resiliency Project](#)—has, inadvertently, turned me into an armchair Infrastructure Guy. So late last month, I joined a guided tour along the East River waterfront. Our group consisted of Danish parliamentarians in sharply tailored suits intermingled along with shorts-wearing dudes of the New York City dirtbag variety. We met outside the new [Solar One building](#) in Stuyvesant Cove, a [nonprofit education center](#) which provided solar power for the locals when the electrical grid went kaput during Hurricane Sandy, and has been redesigned to withstand floods; it stands like a retort from the future to its next-door neighbor, a BP gas station.

Jeremy Siegel, an architect at [Bjarke Ingels Group](#), led the tour, detailing the ways the landscape is on an incline to prevent storm surges from creeping inland and how the flood walls beneath our feet protect against groundwater seepage. Several other climate-minded architects and landscapers who had won the contest to design the project chimed in, including Matthijs Bouw, the renowned Dutch designer whose [ONE Architecture co-designed](#) the new park with Bjarke Ingels.

The thinking, Bouw told Hell Gate, was to build the necessary floodgates while also incorporating feedback from the local community to better integrate public space—what Bouw called "social infrastructure." He cited the bigger playground at Asser Levy and better "circulation" to make the esplanade safer for pedestrians and bikers.

Robert Moses's original design for the park, with its copious fields for football and soccer and courts for tennis and volleyball, had over-focused on sports, Bouw said, reflecting "a sort of a moral idea about how you use parks that basically excluded the community as participants in a park experience," he said.

"I call it 'moral' because the ethics or the morality of Robert Moses's infrastructure was coming from an idea about how he wanted people to be and to behave like good citizens—driving cars, playing sports, not doing any indolence," Bouw explained. "It was never designed as a community place to sort of hang out and grill and do all those things that a community would want from a park." The architects kept the preexisting sports areas, but "shifted" them in the design to make way for more grilling and leisure, while making all of it more accessible to locals with an increase in pedestrian bridges across the treacherous FDR.

"I'm from Amsterdam, and we are all rethinking our cities to be places that help nurture us and also be places where we can meet and relax with a tad of hedonism, with much more equity and much less discipline," Bouw added.



Grill area (Hell Gate)

There was no hedonism to be found on a warm Sunday afternoon in late September, during a wholesome community event to celebrate the opening of the park from Delancey Street down to Pier 42. Groups like the [Lower East Side Ecology Center](#) and [GOLES](#) had set up tents to encourage locals to sign up to help pull weeds and maintain the landscape (for now, the park's 47 open acres only have a single gardener, a casualty of Mayor Eric Adams's [Parks Department budget cuts](#)); the City's Office of Emergency Management was handing out storm planners and hurricane evacuation zone maps. (The evacuation center nearest to where we stood is M.S. 131 on Hester Street, a little over a mile away.) A group of people wearing blue East River Park Stewards shirts had commandeered several picnic tables in the grill area to hand out free hot dogs as bachata and salsa pumped from speakers nearby.

Sophia and Tyler, a young, sportily dressed couple soaking in the sun on a bench along the esplanade, said they had come down from Kips Bay to check out the redo on the park where they used to go to the running track. "I came over here earlier when that turf field was all still dirt and stuff," said Tyler, pointing towards a massive mixed-use athletic area below Grand Street. "It's like, really nice. There's a lot of actual grass to hang out on, but then the pathway is big enough to ride a bike along the way. It's cool." Sophia concurred. The vibe, she concluded, is "pretty good."

The pathway's width in the Delancey/Corlears Hook area of the park leaves enough space for green walkways and a huge sitting field just south of the Williamsburg Bridge, where sunbathers are often sprawled out on towels and reading books. But it's practical, too: on a public walking tour exploring the park's new native-plant flora, [landscape designer](#) Molly Bourne, principal at landscape architecture firm [MNLA](#), explained that the Army Corps of Engineers regulations require 15 feet of leeway between flood walls and trees on all sides in order to achieve FEMA certification.

The trees, of course, were the most [contentious topic](#) when ground was broken on the new park; the redesign led to the uprooting of around 1,000 mature trees, which community advocacy groups like [East River Park Action](#) opposed vehemently. Saltwater inundation from Sandy had already [damaged](#) some of the trees, particularly [the London Planes](#), and others were nearing the end of their life cycles, having been planted in the Moses era, when species and age variety were less of a consideration. "I'm incredibly aware of the sensitivity about the trees, especially as a landscape architect—I love trees," Bourne told Hell Gate. "That's why re-establishing the canopy and trying to really make sure that we had a robust kind of tree and understory that helps with ecology was a prime directive for us...It doesn't make it any less painful, and people loved those trees. Some people grew up with those trees. It kills me, of course, but it is also a complex, layered resiliency that goes way, way underground."



Monarch on an Aster (Hell Gate)

New trees have been planted around the green areas and pathways, and permanent umbrella structures sit above picnic tables and seating areas, though Bouw admitted that right now the only real shade is under the Williamsburg Bridge. (I personally find the umbrellas adequate, though I love to roast under the stupid sun.) A recent post from East River Park Action cofounder Pat Arnow warns that bioswales would have been more adequate protection than the new flood walls, asserting that "the city is building 1950s-style levees, the kind that burst in New Orleans in 2006." A more thorough critique might be that, unlike cities like Boston and San Francisco that are retrofitting highways into green space, the City chose to maintain the sovereignty of FDR Drive, a six-lane highway of carbon and heat emissions that feels as ironic next to a climate-conscious green space as the gas station plopped next to the SolarOne building. As one community-board member told New York Magazine in 2021, "We're trying to do this massive climate-adaptation project, and at the same time, we treat the FDR like it was here when Henry Hudson came!"

On Community Day, one Lower East Side resident had a far less urgent complaint: The basketball courts are *whatever*. As he watched his son shoot hoops with a group of fellow school-aged kids, he pointed out the many basketball courts in the neighborhood on the other side of the Delancey Street Bridge. "There's a basketball court over here, a basketball court over there. And no one plays basketball here anyway," the man, who declined to share his name with me, said with a light scoff. "We're rich in basketball courts. I mean, they also spent a gazillion dollars."



Joggers enjoying the new Pier 42 wilderness (Hell Gate)

We've had variations of East River Park since it first opened in 1939, but something about this version feels more welcoming, one of the rare third spaces in the city where leisure costs nothing and the pluralism on which we pride ourselves bears out. On Sunday, after the nature walk led us to a plantation of purple Asters where a cluster of Monarch butterflies fluttered around, I spoke to a woman named Cielo ("like the sky," she pointed upwards) who's lived on the Lower East Side for 47 years, and appreciates that the solar-powered streetlights stay on through the night. "It's more accessible, and it's more secure," she said. And while she told me she has a couple of gripes—the trees need placards for identifying the species, they should clean out the East River for swimming ("It's hot")—she thinks the new park is a marked improvement on the old one. "Yesterday I was walking around at 7:00," she said. "It was a lot of people, clean, beautiful, and I said, 'You know, this is the park that I want.'"