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Governors Island report

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Governors Island Park Heralds Plan, Picks Short List

By Gregory Haley, AICP, AIA

Event: New York's Next Great Place — Governors Island Park Design Forum

Location: Center for Architecture, 01.17.07

Speakers: Leslie Koch — President, GIPEC; Linda Neal — Superintendent, Governors Island National Monument; Robert Pirani — Executive Director, Governors Island Alliance;

Welcome by Rick Bell, FAIA — Executive Director, AIA NY Chapter

Panelists: Laurie Olin, FASLA — partner, Olin Partnership; Jane Thompson — Thompson Design Group; Mark Strauss, AICP, FAIA — principal, FXFowle Architects; Moderator Robert Yaro — President, Regional Plan Association

Sponsors: Governors Island Alliance; AIA NY Chapter; APA New York Metro Chapter; ASLA-New York; in association with GIPEC & Governors Island National Monument

The reuse of Governors Island — slated to include 25-40 acres of new parkland, a 2.2-mile waterfront promenade, and a preserved Historic District open to the public — presents a rare opportunity to add to New York's legacy of bold civic plans. The recently selected design team shortlist includes: Field Operations/ Wilkinson Eyre Architects; Hargreaves Associates/ Michael Maltzan Architecture; Ramus Ella Architects (REX)/ Michael Desvigne Paysagistes (MDP); West 8 urban design & landscape architecture bv/ Rogers Marvel Architects/ Diller Scofidio + Renfro; and WRT/ Weiss/Manfredi/ Urban Strategies; the final selection will be made this summer. They will need to examine the challenges of programming, transportation, and preservation, and transcend them boldly. They must answer the central question, "Why would people visit there and then come back again?" posed by Jane Thompson, of Boston's Thompson Design Group.

Governors Island should be designed with one clear vision, noted Laurie Olin, FASLA, partner of the Olin Partnership. The 19th century, a time of rapid growth, produced New York's greatest parks: Central Park and Prospect Park, which were designed with anticipation of future urban growth. Similar to the 1811 street grid, they facilitated urban development. Since the 1950s, however, parks have been built piecemeal. "A scrap here, a scrap there," noted Olin. NYC is growing again, and from this growth should come farsighted development.

Well aware of its potential, Leslie Koch, President of the Governors Island Preservation and Education Corporation (GIPEC), stresses how many of the island's unique qualities — its tranquil isolation, historic monuments, and dedication to public open space and educational activities — also pose challenges. In addition, the design team must capitalize on the harbor, complement the existing NYC park system, and above all appeal to the general public.

By highlighting Governors Island's central location in relation to the five boroughs, Olin proposes that the core challenge should be about reinventing the island as a regional destination. If successful, the entire city could be restructured.

Gregory Haley, AICP, AIA, is a project architect and urban designer at Studio V Architects PLLC, and teaches architectural design studios at NYIT School of Architecture.