

February 5, 2006  
Sleeping Beauty  
By MARK CALDWELL

GOVERNORS ISLAND, 172 acres of American history lying just off the southern tip of Manhattan, is terra incognita to most New Yorkers. Commuters, glimpsing it from the Staten Island Ferry, see only an array of abandoned modern buildings and two unpromising landmarks: a white ventilation tower belonging to the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel, and Castle Williams, a grim 19th-century fortification, dark red and pierced by black windows.

The island had belonged to the Army since the 1800's. The Coast Guard took over in 1965 but left in 1997, and it's been moldering ever since. Only within the past few months, after years of neglect and delay, has this stark backdrop to a cross-harbor commute emerged as a major concern for the city.

Deputy Mayor Daniel L. Doctoroff has labeled redevelopment of the island a top priority for Mayor Bloomberg's second term. "Everyone recognizes that to achieve the island's potential," Mr. Doctoroff said, "we have to spend wisely now."

Later this month the Governors Island Preservation and Education Corporation, known as Gipec, the state and city entity responsible for oversight of the island, will choose consultants to help it supervise planning for the island. And on Feb. 15, Gipec will solicit formal proposals from interested developers.

Some financing is finally on the horizon. On Jan. 12, Gov. George Pataki announced that his 2006-07 budget request would include \$30 million, and the mayor has asked for \$30 million more in his current budget to pay for urgent repairs to the island's most frail structures. These improvements, Mayor Bloomberg indicated in his Jan. 26 State of the City speech, will pave the way for a grand design, soon to materialize. "We will select a specific plan for the future of Governors Island," he said, "that makes the most of its spectacular location, beauty and history."

Of course, the money earmarked for the island so far constitutes only an installment on an estimated \$400 million repair bill. But an infusion of energy at Gipec has begun to draw serious attention from the private developers on whom much of the island's future will depend; both the agency and its supporters, keenly aware that projects will have to be practical, nonetheless want them to be worthy of the island's distinctive charisma.

"It's a very special place, a place of beauty, a place of history," Mr. Doctoroff said. "The island in the center of the world."

The experience of disembarking at the stone quayside after the seven-minute ferry ride from the Battery Maritime Building on South Street routinely elicits superlatives. Norman Twain, a producer of "Spinning Into Butter," a forthcoming movie starring Sarah Jessica Parker for which scenes were shot on the island, recalled one particularly evocative misty day. "I remember leaving our offices and walking outside in the rain, with a spectacular view of the

skyline in the distance," Mr. Twain said. "It was heaven."

That indeed describes the 92 northern acres facing Manhattan. But Governors Island is, in fact, a place of two sharply distinct landscapes, and the southern one is far from heavenly: 80 acres of landfill, moved there between 1901 and 1912 from excavation for the city's first subway. It's griddle-flat and pocked with ramshackle 20th-century military buildings, almost certain candidates for razing and redevelopment.

The so-called North Island is a bucolic contrast: its lawns, woods, rolling hills -- occupied by the Lenape Indians for hundreds of years before the Dutch arrived in 1624 -- seem steeped in the past. While no visible traces of early settlement survive, the North Island is home to a dignified ensemble of 19th-century brick and stone warehouse buildings that climb gently toward a green hillside.

Just beyond them lies Fort Jay, surrounded by a dry moat and dating from 1794. Even Confederate soldiers, imprisoned there during the Civil War, sometimes succumbed to its allure. William Drummond, who spent several months confined to the fort in 1862, described it in his diary as "a very fine place" that "commands a view of all the Cities about New York and a full view of the Harbour."

Nearby, an enclave of old yellow clapboard and brick houses surrounds Nolan Park, a New England-like village common. Beyond is the neo-Georgian Liggett Hall, designed by McKim, Mead & White; its tower, the island's tallest structure, crowns an immense archway that frames a vista toward the tip of the island. Until the opening of the Pentagon in 1943, Liggett Hall, built in 1929 to house an entire Army regiment, was the largest structure ever undertaken by the American military.

But once the Army and the Coast Guard left, the place fell asleep, as if under an enchantment: lawns and Victorian houses, the red-brick Works Progress Administration-era movie theater with its gaping box office, the old officers' club with two deserted ballrooms overlooking the channel atop a bastion built for the War of 1812. A broad, empty promenade lined in places by a parade of London plane trees surrounds the island, opening a panorama of sea and air from the Narrows to the Statue of Liberty and the towers of Manhattan in the background.

Perhaps no other place in the city offers a single view of so much of New York Harbor, from the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge up the Hudson and East Rivers as they diverge northward from the Battery.

Stunning an asset though the island is, New York was slow to take advantage of it. The federal government deeded it to the state and city in 2003, but collaboration lagged between the public and private agencies charged with raising money to renew the island and make it accessible to the public. Only now, more than three years later, does the process seem definitively under way. And none too soon, according to those familiar with the island, because some of the most significant buildings are in danger.

"The cost of restoring them will be astronomical if they're allowed to deteriorate too much," said

Andrew S. Dolkart, a professor of historic preservation at the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation.

Mr. Doctoroff is equally emphatic. "Every day that goes by, the infrastructure on the island and the historic buildings deteriorate," he said. "The longer it takes to have a plan, the more it's going to cost us."

### The Planning Challenges

Most urgent -- and likeliest to get immediate attention -- are problems like the island's disintegrating sea wall. In addition, \$46 million will be used to make emergency repairs on buildings on the North Island. Hazardous materials like asbestos will have to be removed, at an estimated cost of \$8 million.

Access to the island will need to be improved before any major construction can take place: transporting large numbers of visitors, like the thousands who might come to hear a concert, poses a major challenge, which will have to be addressed soon. Gipec plans to build a second landing on Buttermilk Channel to allow a new ferry service from Red Hook, Brooklyn. Another recent proposal calls for something more elaborate: a cable car system to link the island with Brooklyn and Manhattan.

In addition, sewage and water systems, which both date from the 19th century, will have to be upgraded; when Mr. Twain, the movie producer, took his walk in the rain, the path led to a bathroom plastered with warnings against drinking the water.

If the current timetable holds, the worst deterioration will be halted within the next few years. Old buildings will be adapted to new uses, and new construction will begin by 2008, at which point Governors Island will begin its transformation into an amenity its advocates hope will resemble nothing else in any other metropolis.

Though a few truly Promethean schemes -- like dividing the island in two by digging a channel -- have been suggested, many of the 101 preliminary ideas submitted to Gipec during the spring and summer of 2005 were modest: bed-and-breakfasts, restaurants, retail stores housed in existing buildings.

Others were larger in scale, like a 5,000-seat amphitheater, and the 20 acres earmarked for education, for which suggestions include a new home for the New York Harbor School, a public high school with a maritime emphasis, or a campus for advanced research, perhaps specializing in nano- or biotechnology.

These ideas will have to take into account certain restrictions imposed by the deed that transferred the island to the city from the federal government.

The oldest buildings must be preserved and adapted to contemporary use. Casinos, private cars and permanent housing are forbidden. The 2.2.-mile esplanade must be kept intact; 40 acres must be preserved for parks; and 22 acres, stretching from Fort Jay to Castle Williams, will

remain under the control of the National Park Service.

But ultimately, whatever finally rises on the island will be the result of a complex dance between public entities like Gipec and private money, a dance made more delicate by the juxtaposition between the palimpsest of history on the North Island and the blank canvas to the south.

Governors Island, 2010

Ideally, the Governors Island of the future might blaze a middle path between two battling urban creeds -- the hunger for size, boldness and spectacle of the Robert Moses era, and the desire, powerfully articulated in the 1960's by the urbanist Jane Jacobs, for quiet, intimate spaces hospitable to the improvisation and serendipity of city life. Governors Island could be an urban extravaganza, or it could be a contemplative 19th-century village floating in the harbor, preserved for family strolls and quiet conversation.

Some planners might hope for development on the epoch-making scale of great New York projects built (like Central Park or Battery Park City) or unbuilt (like Westway). But for Kent Barwick, president of the Municipal Art Society, the true grandeur of the island lies in the harbor surrounding it: the incomparable natural gift that spurred the city's meteoric 19th-century growth, then vanished from its awareness as industrial development walled it off from its people and their neighborhoods.

Mr. Barwick sees Governors Island as a focal point for New York's return to its harbor. Ellis and Liberty Islands, along with the waterside promenades and gardens begun or proposed for the Hudson and East Rivers, promise a system that could, linked by water transport, release the city's pent-up urban energy into a romance with the channels, bays, rivers and sea it has turned its back on for much of the last 150 years.

"Add all these places up," Mr. Barwick said, "and you get the equivalent of a number of Central Parks."

Robert J. Pirani, executive director of the Governors Island Alliance, a group of organizations monitoring development plans, sees the island's imminent resurrection as a step beyond even successful water's-edge projects like South Street Seaport, the promenade in Battery Park City or the refurbished piers between Morton and 14th Streets in the West Village.

"They gave the city a new edge," Mr. Pirani said. "But Governors Island is a whole new place."

## ON THE DRAWING BOARD

### Island Dreams

Official development proposals won't begin flowing in until later this month. But a broad range of ideas have already been offered to the Governors Island Preservation and Education Corporation. These were preliminary, first-pass sketches, not worked out in full detail, as will

be expected of the formal development proposals to be filed beginning this month. But they present a glimpse of the sort of thinking the island has already generated. Some ideas came from major private developers like the Related Companies, perhaps best known for the Time Warner Center. Others are from community groups and even individuals. Suggestions included kayaking launches; bike paths; a giant Ferris wheel like the 443-foot London Eye (though anything that tall would dwarf the Statue of Liberty and probably not be built); and a public market or a performing arts center in the Battery Maritime Building, the ferry terminal for the island.

Here are some ideas that have been offered.

#### A Theater, Plus

John Infantino, chief executive office of Federal Development, a Washington firm that specializes in government property, envisions a 5,000-seat outdoor concert space at the island's tip. On summer nights, the theater would be spectacular, surrounded by the sea, the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge to the south and the Manhattan skyline to the north.

Mr. Infantino would also like to see Liggett Hall renovated to accommodate classes and housing for the students and faculty of a yet-to-be-chosen educational institution. This, in turn, would generate small businesses like coffee shops and dry cleaners, the day-to-day retail services found near many campuses.

The mansions of Colonels' Row, just south of the more modest frame and brick houses surrounding Nolan Park, near Fort Jay, might become bed-and-breakfast establishments. These, in turn, could lead to a project almost everyone sees as inevitable: a hotel and conference center. Such accommodations could make the island an overnight stopover for passengers from the new cruise ship terminal under construction at the Atlantic Basin in Brooklyn, just 400 yards across Buttermilk Channel.

#### Another Davos

Cristyne L. Nicholas, president and chief executive officer of NYC & Company, the city's official tourism marketer, also sees the island's potential as a conference center, comparing it to Davos, the Swiss resort, with the harbor substituting for the Alps as a source both of beauty and security. Ms. Nicholas envisions conferences of world leaders (indeed, Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev met at the Admiral's House in Nolan Park in 1988) in large gathering places and hotels that would help support restaurants, theaters and stores.

#### The Arts and Beyond

Fabrizio Ferri, president of Industria Superstudio in Milan and New York, suggests what he calls the Fabrizio Ferri School of Creativity and Synaesthesia, a complex of studios for photography, sound and dance, along with a restaurant and theaters. Students would come for short-term courses to train their senses in laboratories that explore the five senses.

## A Globe for the New World

Barbara C. Romer, founder of the nonprofit New Globe Theater, has proposed a New World version of Shakespeare's London theater inside Castle Williams, the 19th-century fort along the island's western shore. This concept is highly developed: the design, by the British architect Norman Foster, whose best-known New York landmark is the nearly completed Hearst Tower on Eighth Avenue at 57th Street, has already drawn considerable attention.

The castle's circular courtyard is the same size as the reconstructed London Globe. Mr. Foster has proposed filling it with an airy, three-tiered, 1,200-seat auditorium crowned by open-air observation platforms and a mechanized roof that would follow the sun to admit natural light into the auditorium.

## Fun and Games

Daniel Wolf, a New York art dealer, has joined with the Jonathan Rose Companies, a planning and development firm, to propose an amusement park, or at least a chain of diversions, threaded discreetly through and among the island's green spaces, hotels, institutions and restaurants. He advocates a children's park, inspired by Tivoli in Copenhagen.

"It wouldn't be a Disneyland," Mr. Wolf said. "Imagine something like the Delacorte Theater in Central Park magnified 10 times, with fantastic rides, separated by walkways through the trees, restaurants with water sculptures, a place where families could watch the Statue of Liberty at sunset."

## The Harbor, Writ Small

Harbor 360, a consortium of nine organizations that include Cornell University, has proposed a project designed to appeal in particular to fans of the city's waterfront: a walkable, wadeable and even navigable miniature model of New York Harbor from the New Jersey shore to Jones Beach on Long Island.

Visitors would approach through a heavily wooded model of the Bronx to find themselves in an amphitheater with a retractable roof. Pathways would lead across a miniature Verrazano - Narrows footbridge to a model of the Jamaica Bay wetlands, a kite-flying site at Kennedy Airport, and small models of Rockaway and Jones Beaches, from which children (and adults) could wade and even swim. A fleet of paddleboats would be available so would-be sailors could practice docking and navigating through a scaled-down rendition of shoals in the harbor.

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