

SIX DOLLARS

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# LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE



**NEW  
URBAN  
WATERFRONTS**



# POETIC SPACE: NEW URBAN WATERFRONTS





# RIVERS IN THE CITY

**New waterfront landscapes provide much-needed access to urban rivers** □ Cities throughout the world have been ambitiously reclaiming their waterfronts for a variety of uses. Along with real-estate development and the enhancement of tourism (in the form of new aquariums, museums, hotels, restaurants and shops), some sort of “public access” generally is included as an amenity. There has been considerable tension, though, about just who should benefit from these non-revenue-producing amenities, what configuration they should have and how large a part of the budget they should get. The result can be some pretty grudging “access.” The projects that follow, however, are magnificent exceptions.

OVERLEAF: ALAN KARCHMER



ALAN KARCHMER

## WOLDENBERG RIVERFRONT PARK

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE





The newly created, 12-acre Woldenberg Riverfront Park qualifies as an extravagant civic gesture—a “give back” from those responsible for New Orleans’ new aquarium, which now sits along the downtown edge of the Mississippi River, near Canal Street. Designed by the local landscape architecture firm Design Consortium, it has also turned out to be an exemplary urban park that fulfills its obligation to the immediate neighborhood and to the city as a whole.

The design of Woldenberg Park was especially challenging since it stretches on one side along the Mississippi and on the other along one of this country’s most delicate, most important, and—according to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which considered the effects of tourism in their evaluation—most endangered architectural resources, the city’s 18th-century French Quarter, or Vieux Carré. Because of its proximity to the latter, the park was enveloped in controversy from the beginning, with arguments arising over how “historic” and how “authentic” it ought to be, even though it was being designed at the end of the 20th century.

Although officially engaged as consultant to the architects for the aquarium, Design Consortium was responsible for 75 percent of the work for Woldenberg Park, which was intended as passive green space that would be appealing and useful primarily to residents of the Quarter rather than to tourists, and, at the same time, to be visually compatible with the historic district. Most of the green space had to be created, though, since that section of the Mississippi had long served as an active port and was lined with derelict concrete wharves and the concrete foundations that had supported warehouses and shed structures. And, as Carlos Cashio, a principal in Design Consortium, points out, if all of that man-made structure had been torn down, there would have been “only a little skinny strip of land” left for a park. Thus, Design Consortium’s strategy was to create a park (with lightweight soil) on top of these structures and to allow the layering to be apparent.

Designed fluidly around a large, semi-elliptical lawn and with densely planted groves of native and introduced trees and shrubs, Woldenberg Park sits close to the water’s edge. Design Consortium’s own extremely simple but elegant guard-

**Overleaf, opposite and above: Access to the river and works by local sculptors John Scott and Ida Kohlmeyer enliven Woldenberg Park.**

rail separates the brick-and-bluestone paved promenade from the river while affording nearly unobstructed views. Just beyond the guardrail, a new protective wood apron incorporates original planks from the old wharves, as well as original metal cleats, which have been allowed to protrude.

Engagement with the river is further stressed in places where wharves had not existed; there, banks of riprap have been used to tie the promenade directly to the river, which can be seen (and heard) lapping at the bottom edge of the rock fragments. Design Consortium also will be refurbishing the existing steamboat landing at Woldenberg Park’s northern edge to incorporate it into the park’s aesthetic.

That aesthetic achieves an impressive balance between the bucolic and the urbane. Although Woldenberg Park is a quiet oasis of green that is oriented, gently, toward river views, it also is joined to the city by bluestone-paved stairways and walkways and by the paved promenade. Design Consortium’s wicker-like benches and trash receptacles made of solid round steel bars, used previously in New Orleans’ Armstrong Park, have been used again here to excellent effect. And subtly historic lighting standards reinforce awareness of the park’s proximity to the French Quarter.

New Orleans is known for its energetic and thoughtful public art program, a tradition upheld in Woldenberg Park, although in this instance orchestrated by the client and the architects rather than the city. The first work to be installed was by local sculptor John Scott. Set at the top of the stairway leading from Conti Street, it is a grid of slender, polished stainless steel triangles supporting large, open stainless steel circles, slightly a tilt as if windswept.

By reweaving the river with the city in a way that enhances the lives of New Orleans’ residents, Woldenberg Riverfront Park serves as an example for cities everywhere.

—Ellen Posner

*Ellen Posner is architecture critic for the Wall Street Journal.*